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Allegiances

The Barn Cats

Dice - Black and white tom with yellow eyes.

Velvet - White she-cat with light blue eyes. Mother to Dice's kits:

Deserve - Black tom with white paws and green eyes.

Boost - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Song - White she-cat with light blue eyes.

Shadow C lan

Leader: Depthstar - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Deputy: Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Dewpaw

Warriors

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Flamepaw

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes.

Apprentice, Copperpaw

Maplefur - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Diamondpaw

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkblaze - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Timberpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Poppywing - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Rainheart - Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Poisonedsap - Dark golden she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, and nose blaze, black ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Dewpaw - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Diamondpaw - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, white chest, muzzle, and chin, ice blue eyes.

Flamepaw - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Copperpaw - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberpaw - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to

Depthstar's kits:

Blackkit - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Brownkit - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Snakekit - Brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes. Expecting Ashcloud's kits.

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Chapter 1

It was a cold winter night. Snowflakes drifted down onto the earth in thick flurries, layering onto the blanket of snow that stretched across the field. It glistened and shone under the moonlight. Further into the field, an old barn stood, heaps of snow piling up around it.

A black and white tom padded alongside the barn, the snow crunching softly under his paws. He stopped and looked around. So quiet... Nothing but him and the peaceful silence of the night. He closed his eyes and raised his head to the stars, happiness running through him. Flurries fell onto him and clung to his pelt, making his black fur look almost identical to the stars in the night sky. Any housecat would have found this moment a nightmare, being outside, wet and cold. But he had been a farmcat all his life. He enjoyed being outside, and the coolness felt good on his pelt. And whenever it became too much, he could go back to the barn and curl up in the hay with Velvet.

Since he was a kit, he'd lived in the abandoned barn with his brother, Boost. When his companion died of sickness, he had spent many seasons alone. Once in a while, a cat would come by for food or shelter, and he was always willing to help. Very rarely, an aggressive cat would come along and try to take the barn from him, engaging in a fight. It had only happened twice. He had always managed to fight them off. This was the place where he grew up with his brother, the place he called home. He would never give it up. But it got lonely, hunting mice by himself, falling asleep alone in the barn. It wasn't the same with Boost gone.

However, this all changed last winter, when a cold, hungry housecat named Velvet came across the barn in a snowstorm. She had been abandoned by the side of the road by her housefolk a day earlier, and would have frozen or starved to death if she hadn't found the barn. Her coat was so white, he didn't see her right away against the snowstorm. He had let her stay in the barn and hunted for her until she was better. Enjoying his company and having

nowhere else to go, Velvet had decided to stay with him. He couldn't have been more glad. And after a few moons, they fell in love.

She was most of the reason why he was so happy tonight. Velvet was expecting his kits, and they would be born any day now. He couldn't wait to be a father and show his kits all the wonderful things about life around the barn. He hoped they would love it as much as he had when he was a kit, and still did.

Something moved out of the corner of his eye against the snow, and he snapped his attention to it. A small mouse was scurrying alongside the barn, looking for a way to get inside where it was warm. He immediately dropped into a hunting crouch. *I'll catch it for Velvet.* He thought, fixing his eyes on the tiny creature. He started forward.

"Dice!"

His heart skipped a beat when he heard Velvet call for him. She sounded panicked. The mouse scurried away, but he hardly noticed. *It must be time!* "I'm coming!" He abandoned his hunt and bounded through the snow around to the front of the barn, slipping through a space between two broken wood planks. Inside, Velvet lay on her side in her nest of hay, flanks heaving. Her blue eyes flashed to him anxiously and she opened her jaws to say something, only to wail instead.

"I'm here." Dice crouched over her and licked her head. "It's going to be okay."

Velvet panted. "I don't know if I'm ready for this!"

"Of course you are." Dice licked her soft white ear. "You can do it!" He tried to sound calm for her sake, but his heart was pounding hard with both excitement and fear. *I don't know if* I'm *ready for this!*

"I-" She broke off and wailed as she pushed. A moment later, a tiny brown bundle of fur tumbled into the hay.

A kit! The first kit! Dice quickly pulled it close and began lapping at

it's fur, bringing it to life. The kit stretched out and let out a tiny meow. "It's a tom," He announced to his mate happily.

"Really?" Velvet's eyes brightened and she strained to look at him, but only for a second before she gasped out and continued kitting. Next came a tiny white she-cat, who Dice licked clean before placing her gently beside her brother.

"That one's a she-cat," Dice purred and stared at his mate, his heart pounding. *Are there any more?*

Velvet wailed and pushed out a tiny black ball of fur. Dice gently pulled the kit toward him with one paw and cleaned him as he'd done with the other kits. "It's a tom," He told her as the kit squeaked, moving his tiny white paws.

"Is it over?" rasped Velvet. When Dice nodded a reply, She lifted her snowy head and gazed at her kits lovingly. Dice nudged them toward her stomach, and they began to suckle. He gazed at his kits happily, warmth spreading through him from ears to tail tip. *They're perfect.* The white she-kit looked just like Velvet. The black tom had white paws like Dice, however the rest of his body was jet black. The stripes on the brown tabby kit reminded him of his brother, Boost, who had been a gray tabby.

Velvet purred weakly as she gazed at the kits. "What should we name them?" She looked exhausted.

"Theres plenty of time for that later," Dice purred. He circled her and curled up against her back in the hay, resting his chin on her shoulder. "Sleep now, my love." The two cats began to doze off together, purring happily.

***

Dice woke up and slowly blinked open his yellow eyes. Daylight shone through the cracks of the barn. He lifted his head from Velvet and looked down, letting out a soft purr. She was still asleep, her flank slowly rising and falling.

The three kits were curled up against her belly. The white she-cat

was snuggled against her tabby brother. The black tom was curled up against her with his tiny black tail around him. Dice purred and slowly stood, careful not to wake them. But the black kit seemed to sense that he'd moved and turned his head back toward him, letting out a tiny mew. Dice purred and gently touched his nose to his son's head. Velvet shifted and turned her head to look at Dice.

"Good morning," He purred and nuzzled her. "How are you feeling?"

Velvet purred and touched her pink nose to his. "I have a perfect mate and three perfect kits. I've never been happier."

A purr rumbled loudly in his throat. "Are you hungry?" He asked. Velvet shook her head, but her stomach growled. "I'll go catch you a mouse," He purred and stepped out of the nest of hay.

Velvet stared at him warmly. "I don't want you to go..."

Dice's heart warmed. "I won't be long," He promised, licking her head. "I'll be back soon with the best mouse I can find."

He left the barn and looked around. It had snowed a lot overnight. The world was white for as far as he could see. It wasn't as cold as it had been last night, but the sun was hidden behind the clouds coating the sky. The world felt new and fresh. He had kits now. Everything would be different.

I'll have to do extra hunting. He realized. Instead of two cats to feed, he had five. Velvet was used to the soft life of a house cat. She'd never needed to fend for herself. Dice had tried showing her how to hunt multiple times, but she'd shown no interest. In the end, Dice had decided to do the hunting for her as well as himself. *And I'll need to hunt for the kits until they're old enough to learn.* He thought.

He spotted a plump gray mouse nibbling at a seed by the corner of the barn. Dice crouched and slowly crept toward it, careful not to crunch the snow under his paws. He stepped lightly and carefully. Focusing on the rodent. When he was close enough, he sprang at it. It squeaked in alarm as he grasped it in his claws and bit into it's neck. The tiny creature went still. He picked it up and hurried back to Velvet, his tail held high.

She was gently licking at the kits, her tail curled around them. She perked up when she saw him. "That was fast," She commented.

Dice sat down in front of her and dropped the mouse. "I told you I would be," He purred and nudged it toward her.

She took a few bites of it, then paused and looked down at the kits. "They need names," She murmured.

"Do you have any ideas?" Dice prompted.

Velvet gazed at the kits. "I've always liked hearing the birds sing in the morning around the barn," She meowed happily as she watched the tiny white she-cat. "I'd like to call her Song."

"That's a beautiful name," Dice purred warmly and looked at the toms. The little tabby continued to remind him of his brother. "Can we name the tabby Boost? After my brother?"

"Of course," Velvet murmured. "I think it suits him."

"What about the last kit?" Dice looked at the black tom. He was trying to sit up in the hay, but kept flopping over.

Velvet purred and gently nudged him to his paws. "I love his white paws." She crouched to take another bite out of the mouse just as the unnamed kit stumbled forward into it. He squeaked and sniffed at it before climbing on top of it, refusing to let his mother touch it.

Dice chuckled and Velvet let out an amused purr. "I think he thinks he deserves that mouse, Dice."

He purred. "Sorry little one, you're too young to eat mice." The word Velvet had used echoed in his mind, and he looked up thoughtfully. "Deserve... What if we call him Deserve?"

Velvet looked up. "Deserve?" She blinked. "It's a strange name."

"It's a unique name." Corrected Dice. As he spoke, the white pawed kit looked up at his father and let out a tiny mew. "I think he agrees!" He purred.

Velvet purred and gazed down at the kit. "Then Deserve it is." She leaned down and rasped her tongue over his black furred head. "Welcome to the barn, little one."

Everything is perfect. Dice thought as he gazed at his family. *Life will be amazing here. Me and my family will always share the barn together. Nothing will ever separate us.*

Chapter 2

"Catch this, Song!"

"Got it!"

Deserve was awoken by the sound of his littermates playing. He opened his eyes and blinked a few times, groggy with sleep. *They're up already?* It was still very dark inside the barn, telling him that the sun hadn't risen yet. Boost and Song were throwing a ball of moss back and forth between them, laughing and yowling excitedly.

"Ha!" Boost pounced on the moss and dug his tiny claws into it, his eyes gleaming. "It's mine now!"

Song's blue eyes lit with protest. "No fair!" Her brother turned and fled with the moss ball in his teeth, and she took off after him. "Wait until I catch you!"

Deserve let out a groan and curled up against his mother, burying his face in her soft white fur. *I just want to get some sleep!*

Velvet shifted and sighed softly. "Kits!" She blinked open her blue eyes as Boost and Song paused and looked at her. "Some of us are trying to sleep. Please play more quietly."

"Okay, mom," Boost sighed reluctantly. He and Song began murmuring quietly to each other.

Thank goodness! Deserve thought and happily snuggled up against Velvet, closing his eyes. He'd just begun to get used to the peaceful silence in the barn when they began laughing again. He heard Boost yowl.

"Go get it, Song!"

Hey! The moss ball bounced off his head, and he let out a startled growl. "Guys!"

A moment later, his siblings leaped at him. "Wake up, Deserve!" Song purred and playfully batted her paws at his shoulder. "Come play with us!" Deserve's annoyance faded as she tickled him, and he began to laugh, playfully batting his paws at her chest.

"Yeah!" Boost playfully pulled on his ear. "We can team up against Song!"

"*Or* me and you can team up against Boost!" Song glared at the tabby. "We'll teach that furball a lesson!"

Boost bristled. "Who are you calling a furball?"

"You!" Deserve playfully pushed his brother over. "You never let anyone get any sleep! You're louder than a thunderstorm!"

"Well, you're lazy!" Boost retorted, his eyes gleaming. "Dad says playing makes you strong."

"Dad also says you need your sleep."

They turned to see that their father had padded into the barn. He was carrying three mice by their tails. Though his voice was stern, his yellow eyes were shining with affection for his kits. He padded over and dropped the mice by Velvet's nest, gently nudging her with his muzzle before turning to his kits. "You shouldn't be awake so early," He told them gently.

Boost frowned. "You're up early," He pointed out.

"Yup!" Song agreed, her eyes shining up at her father. "Every morning before the stars have disappeared."

"That's because I have to hunt for you all," Dice reminded her and crouched, licking her head. "You should take advantage of not having responsibilities. And if I remember correctly, you and Boost were awake very late last night."

"We were playing tag," Song purred.

"And I won!" Boost added, lifting his chin proudly.

Dice purred and nuzzled the tabby. "Winning isn't everything, Boost."

"And your father is right." Velvet stretched and stood up in her nest, sniffing at the mice Dice had brought before gazing at her kits. "You two hardly got any sleep last night. You need your rest if you're going to be healthy and strong."

Boost's ears flicked forward. "I want to be strong."

"Me too!" Deserve added, sitting beside his brother. "Then I could help dad hunt. He wouldn't have to do it all by himself!"

"Or we could fight!" Boost exclaimed, spinning to face him and dropping into a crouch. "Imagine if some strangers came along! We could rip them to shreds!"

Fight? Deserve grew uneasy at the thought of drawing blood and causing another cat to suffer. "I wouldn't want to hurt anyone!"

"Chicken," Boost teased.

"Now, now." Velvet pulled Deserve close and licked his head. "Deserve is right. There's no need to harm anyone." Deserve let out a purr.

Boost blinked at her. "But what if some strange cat came to the barn and tried to hurt us?" He turned to Dice. "Would you fight him?"

"Of course," Dice meowed. "I would never let anything hurt my family." He gazed down at them. "I would fight with tooth and claw to protect you."

Deserve stared up at his father, still unsure. *I'd do anything to protect us. But to hurt a cat? I don't know...*

"But you should never start a fight." Velvet murmured. "Only forest cats do that."

Deserve grew uneasy as he remembered the forest cats his parents had told them about. They were cruel, savage cats who lived in the woods and ate bones. Dice told them that his brother had once run

into a group of them. He'd barely made it back to the barn alive.

I hope I never run into any forest cats. Deserve thought with a shudder. *They must be terrifying!* He hoped that none would ever come to the barn to attack them.

"Are you hungry?" Dice prompted, breaking Deserve out of his thoughts. He was nudging a mouse toward Velvet, who purred gratefully and began eating. He turned to his kits. "I think it's time you three tried mouse."

All three kits perked up, their tails lifting into the air. "Really?" Deserve exclaimed excitedly.

"A mouse? For us?" Song squeaked, her eyes lighting up. Beside her, Boost bounced up and down eagerly.

Velvet looked surprised. "Mouse? Already?"

"Yes, they're five months old," Dice reminded her. "They can't live on milk forever."

She sighed, gazing at the kits as they stared up at their father excitedly. "They grow like weeds."

He picked up a mouse and rested it in front of his kits. "Which one of you would like to try it first?" He prompted.

Boost and Song started forward, then hesitated, exchanging a glance. "What does it taste like?" Boost asked uncertainly. "Is it good?"

"Do you eat the fur too?" Song studied the mouse. "I'm not sure I want that..."

Dice purred. "Try it and you'll find out." He twitched his black tail. "Go on."

It doesn't look too bad... Deserve hesitated before stepping toward the dead rodent, stretching his neck forward and giving it a curious sniff. "It smells good."

"Deserve," Dice chuckled, gazing at him. "I should have known."

"He's been interested in mice since the moment he was born," Velvet purred and sat beside her mate.

Deserve drew in a deep breath. The scent of the mouse made his mouth water. He was about to take a bite, but paused, looking up. Dice and Velvet were sitting side by side, watching him with excitement and pride in their eyes. He looked over his shoulder and saw Boost and Song staring at him, looking curious to see his reaction.

Well, here it goes! Deserve took a small bite out of the mouse, tasting blood and flesh on his tongue. He began chewing, awkwardly aware of everyone watching him. He swallowed.

"Well?" Dice prompted. "What did you think?"

"It's great!" Deserve purred, his stomach growling for more. *I wish I'd tried it sooner!* Velvet let out a purr.

Boost and Song stared at him. "It is?" His sister asked eagerly.

"Yeah!" He licked his muzzle. "It's delicious!"

"Then move over!" Boost bounded over and shouldered Deserve aside, leaning over the mouse. "I want to try."

Song ran to his side. "Me too!"

Deserve backed away to let his siblings have the rest, letting out a purr of amusement. He was eager to see what they thought of the taste. Sure enough, they both loved it.

"Wow! It's tasty!" Boost meowed, taking another bite. Song joined him, purring loudly.

"I'm glad you think so," Dice purred. "Because you'll be eating it every day from now on."

"Yay!" Song exclaimed and shouldered into Boost. "Move over!"

"Make sure you share, kits." Velvet watched them and leaned against Dice, purring. He wrapped his tail around her.

Deserve stared up at his father, admiration blazing through him. "When I'm older, I want to hunt just like you!"

He looked at him and let out a purr. "One day when you're bigger, I'll show you how." He leaned over and rasped his tongue over Deserve's head. "Then you can catch all the mice you want!"

"Yeah!" Deserve's tail shot up with excitement. "We'll have a feast!" The thought of feeding his family filled his heart with joy. *Dice has such an important job. I want to be important too, and help others!*

Boost stretched out and groaned. "I'm stuffed!" Beside him, Song stretched her jaws wide open and yawned.

Velvet let out a purr and padded toward them. "You're finally tired?" She gently picked up Song by her scruff and carried her to the nest of hay. Boost padded after them slowly, his yellow eyes tired.

"I think they could use a nap." Dice gently nudged Boost into the nest. He and Song curled up together in the hay.

Though he wasn't as tired, Deserve decided to join them. He climbed over Boost and settled. "You're finally going to be quiet?" He teased.

"Shut up," Boost nudged him playfully. Deserve purred and curled up between him and Song, closing his eyes. *Maybe now I can finally get some rest.*

Chapter 3

The sun was beginning to set over the fields. Dappled sunlight shone through the cracks in the roof of the barn.

"I'll get you, Song!" Boost exclaimed as he ran after her across the barn. Deserve pelted after his siblings, his heart racing. They'd been chasing each other and playing tag for a while, and he was getting tired. But he was having too much fun to quit.

"You never will!" Song purred and skidded to a stop in front of a pile of hay, stepping back. Deserve and Boost squeaked in alarm and tried to stop, but went skidding over bits of hay and straight into the pile. "Oof!"

"Hey!" Deserve scrambled out of the pile, shaking pieces of hay from his fur. Boost joined him a moment later, a clump of hay resting on his head. He let out a laugh and pushed Boost over, grabbing a pawful of hay and pushing it onto his head. "Take that!"

Boost let out a playful growl and tackled Deserve, pushing him into the hay and nipping his ear. "Oh yeah, hay-pelt?"

"Kits!" Velvet padded up to them, her blue eyes shining. "It's getting late. You should be resting."

"Aww!" The kits leaped apart and stared at her.

"But we're not tired!" Boost protested, and Deserve and Song nodded agreement. *I want to play some more!* He thought, exhilarated as his little heart thumped in his chest.

Song stared up at Velvet hopefully. "Can we play hide and seek?" She asked.

Their mother purred and looked past her toward the entrance of the barn. "Your father will be back from hunting soon. Won't he want to see you resting?"

"Please!" The kits stared at her, eyes round and hopeful.

Velvet let out a purr. "Oh, alright!" Her eyes shone. "But only if I can play too."

"Yay!" Song squeaked and bounced up and down. "Are you going to seek?"

"Of course," She purred and padded up to a post in the barn, facing it and closing her eyes as she began counting. "One... Two..."

The kits looked around quickly. *I've got to find a good place to hide!* Deserve thought. His gaze darted around the barn and rested on the pile of hay he and Boost had crashed into. *There! That's perfect!* He raced over and leaped face-first into the hay, flinching a little as the hard pieces poked at his face. Ow! He shuffled forward in the hay until he could just see through and peered out.

Velvet was still counting. "Six... Seven..."

He spotted Song's white tail sticking out behind an old shovel resting against the wall of the barn and chuckled. *She'll be caught first!* He looked for Boost, but couldn't see him.

"Nine..."

Ah! Deserve shifted further back into the hay, staring out at his mother. *She'll never find me!* He thought triumphantly. As she moved, he spotted Boost crouched behind the post she'd been counting by. *Sneaky!*

"Ten!" Velvet finished and turned, looking around the barn. "Ready or not, here I come!" She began padding around, her blue eyes scanning her surroundings carefully. She almost immediately caught sight of Song's tail behind the shovel. She let out a purr and began padding toward it. "Oh, where could Song be?"

Song giggled, her tail twitching as she tried to move it out of sight. Velvet reached her and snatched her up by her scruff. Song laughed and struggled to pull free. "Hey, let go!"

Velvet purred and gently rested her on the floor of the barn. "Got

you! You know what that means?" Her eyes gleamed mischievously.

She sat down and stared at her. "What?"

"I get to lick you clean!" Velvet shot forward and pulled Song close with one paw, rasping her tongue over her fur.

"Ew!" Song wailed and struggled to get away. "It's the licky monster! Boost! Deserve!"

Boost snickered and stayed where he was by the post, but Deserve let out a playful growl and sprang out of the hay, bounding toward them. "I'll save you!" He leaped onto Velvet's back and playfully batted his white paws at her shoulder. "Let her go, you monster!" He purred.

Velvet let go of Song, whose white fur was wet and sleek from all the licking. Deserve leaped off of his mother and laughed as he stared at his sister. "Look at your fur!"

Song glared at him, shaking out her slick fur.

"I wouldn't laugh, Deserve," Velvet's voice hardened, and he was startled, thinking he was about to be scolded. *I was just teasing!* But her eyes lit with warmth once again. "Because now it's your turn!"

Deserve gasped in alarm and spun to race away, but Velvet grabbed him before he could and pulled him against her chest. "No!" He exclaimed as she began quickly lapping at his fur. He struggled and tried to duck away from her tongue. "Ew!"

He heard Boost laughing, and every cat looked toward him. He was sitting by the post, his tabby shoulders shaking as he laughed hard at them. "You two look ridiculous!"

Velvet let go of Deserve and stood, her gaze resting on Boost, who's amusement quickly faded. "Oh no." He started backing away, and Velvet leaped at him. "No!" Boost gasped and spun, bolting across the barn with Velvet hard on his tail. "Help!" His yellow eyes flashed to his siblings. "Guys!"

Deserve and Song sat together and exchanged an amused glance

before they looked back at Boost. "You'll be fine," He purred, and Song laughed. *He didn't help us, so why should we help him?*

Boost skidded to a halt in a corner of the barn, letting out an alarmed gasp. "Ah!"

Velvet chuckled and cornered him. "I've got you now!" She scooped him up by the scruff and carried him back to the other kits.

Deserve watched in amusement as his brother suffered the same ordeal. "Stop!" Boost grunted and twisted, trying to escape her tongue. "Ew! Gross!" Deserve and Song snickered.

"There! Nice and clean." Velvet nuzzled him and released him. Boost immediately stumbled away, his brown tabby fur a spiky mess.

As their mother sat down and licked her paw, Deserve waved his tail eagerly. "Can we play again! Please?"

Velvet hesitated, looking outside. "It's getting late..."

"Just one more!" Song begged and looked at Boost, who was trying to smooth out his wet fur. "Right, Boost?"

Boost shuddered. "As long as there's no more licking, I'm in!"

Their mother purred. "Alright! I'll hide this time." She gently nudged Boost with her pink nose. "Boost, why don't you seek? You're always very good at it."

Boost let out a purr at her compliment. "Of course I am!" He puffed out his chest. "I'm the best!"

"We'll see about that," Song muttered.

Boost glared at her before crouching, covering his eyes with his paws. "Okay, okay. One... Two... Three..."

Deserve and Song raced away to find hiding spots. Deserve saw another pile of hay and ran behind it, peering out. Song had leaped into a haystack like he had earlier, but her tail was sticking out

again. He purred in amusement. Velvet was sitting up on a barn loft, gazing down at Boost.

"Ready or not, here I come!" Boost turned and hurried around the barn, sniffing around as he walked. He looked over and saw Song's tail sticking out of the haystack. He snickered and crouched, slowly stalking toward her. When he was close enough, he pounced on her tail, pinning it with his paws.

"Ow!" Song yelped and leaped out, sending hay flying everywhere. "That hurt!"

Boost laughed, and a moment later, Velvet leaped down from the loft, landing behind him. "Boo!"

He leaped up and squeaked in alarm, spinning to face her. "Hey!" They all laughed. Deserve watched in amusement.

"What's going on here?"

Deserve took a step away from the hay and saw that Dice had come into the barn, three dead mice at his paws. His yellow eyes gleamed with amusement.

"Dice!" Boost and Song raced up to their father. Velvet sat down and watched warmly as Dice nuzzled them.

Their father paused, looking around. "Where's Deserve?"

"I'm here!" Deserve ran out and bounded to his father, purring loudly. "Did you catch a lot today? Where did you go? Did anything exciting happen?"

Dice purred and licked Deserve's head. "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow," He promised. "It's getting late. You all need to rest."

"Aww!" Boost and Song complained.

Deserve gazed up at his father and purred. "I can't wait!" He loved hearing about what Dice did every day. Even if he had to wait, it would be worth it. *He's the best father ever, and he hunts for us! Where would we be without him?*

Chapter 4

"So where did you go?" Boost whispered. Deserve and his siblings were huddled together in their nest with Velvet and Dice curled up around them. Despite their father promising to tell them about his day in the morning, none of them could wait. They didn't leave the barn often. Rain pattered off of the wood of the barn, causing a foul scent. It was night outside.

Dice sighed softly and shifted in the hay, his eyes closed. "Can't it wait until tomorrow?" Beside him, Velvet parted her eyes slightly and gazed at the kits.

"Please!" Song begged, staring at him with wide blue eyes. She stepped onto his back and began gently tugging on his ear. "Dice! Dad!"

Deserve was just as curious as his siblings. But he didn't want to pester Dice. He knew how much work his father did. He needed the rest. He couldn't imagine how tired he was. Even more than he was after his game of hide and seek.

Boost climbed over Deserve and began jumping on Dice's back. "What if we go to sleep right after?" He suggested. "We will!"

"Yeah!" Song meowed hopefully. "We promise!"

Dice sighed and rolled onto his stomach, straightening. "Alright, alright," He purred. Boost and Song leaped away and sat in front of him, staring up at him excitedly. Velvet purred and rested her chin on Dice's paw.

Deserve sat with his littermates, eager to hear what his father had to say. But he felt a pang of sympathy when he saw the exhaustion in his yellow eyes. *It must be hard, having four cats to take care of...*

"I spent most of the morning hunting mice in the fields," Dice yawned as he spoke, then relaxed. "Then I caught a couple rabbits

by the thunderpath."

Song's eyes widened. "The thunderpath? That sounds scary!"

"Isn't that near where the wild cats live?" Boost asked nervously. "The forest cats?"

Dice nodded. "Right across the thunderpath is the pine forest," He explained. "There's a group of forest cats that live there," He paused. "Shadow-something."

Deserve's fur prickled. *Shadow... That sounds scary!* He imagined the dark cats slinking through the forest like shadows, ready to strike with sharp teeth and claws. "Have you ever met a forest cat?" He asked curiously.

His father shook his black and white head. "No," He meowed. "But me and my brother knew someone who did. He was a kit dumped by the side of the road by twolegs. They left him for dead."

His heart ached as he imagined being in that kits place. *How scared he must have been... I'm lucky I wasn't raised with twolegs.* He'd never seen one, but his parents told them they were horrible creatures. A twoleg had abandoned their mother in the middle of winter. It was only luck that she'd found Dice. *I hope I never run into one of those horrible things.*

"What happened to him?" Song asked anxiously. "Did he live?"

"Yes," Dice assured her. "Me and my brother found him and let him stay in the barn until he was old enough to leave and fend for himself. His name was Sulfur, and he came to visit us sometimes. He told us about the forest cats who lived by the river. He met some of them."

Boost stared at him. "Did they attack him? Did he get in a fight?"

"Did he win?" Deserve added.

Dice shook his head. "No. They were friends of his." When the kits looked startled, he added, "I was surprised too. I don't know how Sulfur got along with those ruffians, but he did." He paused. "It

didn't seem to last though."

Deserve stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know everything," Dice meowed. "But he came by around the time you three were born. You were too young to remember. He told us he was leaving the forest because there was too much bloodshed. He felt that he was in danger and urged us not to stray far from the barn. He told us there were evil cats here. I believe he meant the forest cats."

"Wow..." Song murmured. "You can't trust them."

"You must always be careful, and protect each other," Dice murmured. It was quiet for a moment.

Velvet let out a purr. "I think that's enough storytelling for one night." She licked her mate's black ear. "The kits need to sleep."

Boost and Song looked disappointed, and Dice purred. "We had a deal!"

"Okay... I guess I am a little tired." Boost stretched his jaws wide open in a yawn, then curled up against Velvet. Song curled into a ball against him, and Deserve joined his littermates.

As he closed his eyes and tucked his tail over his nose, he began thinking about everything Dice had told them. *Those forest cats sound like evil, bloodthirsty creatures... Maybe they're even worse than twolegs.* He squeezed his eyes shut and drifted into a deep sleep, listening to the calming sound of the rain.

He didn't know how much time had passed. But suddenly, he opened his eyes and pricked his ears, his eyes darting uneasily around the barn. *Something's wrong...* The sound of the rain had changed. Rather than gentle splashing, it had become the soft hissing of cats, slowly getting louder and louder. Deserve froze, his fur standing on end as the invisible cats hissed at him from all angles. *What's happening!?*

He looked at the entrance to the barn and froze, letting out a terrified cry. Black, shadowy forms of cats were slinking down into

the barn, eyes glowing red. Their sharp white teeth and claws glinted as they crept closer to him, moving in an odd unnatural way. Their bodies curved and twisted as they walked, their tails trailing behind them like black smoke.

"Dice!" Deserve wailed in terror. "Velvet!" He spun to face them and let out a horrified screech. His parents lay dead, their throats torn open and eyes dark and sightless. He saw two little skeletons beside them and cried out. "No!" It was Boost and Song. Blood soaked through the nest of hay and oozed under Deserve's paws.

He spun to face the shadowy cats closing in on him, their red flaring eyes blinding. "Why did you do this to my family?" He cried in heartache. "Why are you so evil?"

A shadowy cat stopped in front of Deserve, grinning and fixing its piercing red gaze on him. Then, it lunged down at Deserve, snapping its glinting fangs at him.

BOOM!

Deserve nearly leaped straight out of his fur. He snapped open his eyes and scrambled backwards, sending bits of hay scattering around. His heart jolted and pounded rapidly at his chest, and he breathed heavily.

"Deserve?" Velvet quickly sat up and stared at him, her eyes round with concern. "It's alright," She soothed and pulled him close, gently lapping at his fur. "It's just thunder."

Dice looked up toward the sky from where he lay. "That was a loud one."

Deserve's heart raced as he trembled and looked around him. *They're okay!* Boost and Song were huddled together against Dice, looking around nervously. *It was just a nightmare...* His eyes darted around the barn, half expecting the shadowy cats to come slinking in from the dark rain outside. *No shadowy cats here...* It was raining much harder than it had been earlier.

"Dice?" Deserve trembled as he stared up at his father anxiously.

"W-will the forest cats ever come here? W-will they hurt us?"

His father looked surprised. "No. They never have before. Why?"

"I-I had a nightmare..." Deserve struggled to flatten his fur. It was standing on end. "About the shadowy cats..."

Dice's yellow eyes grew soft with sympathy. "I shouldn't have told you that story before you went to sleep." He flicked his tail. "Come here."

He wobbled toward his father on shaky legs and curled up against his fur, his eyes wide with fear.

Boost looked at him and snorted. "What are you so-" Thunder roared in the distance, and he cried out and huddled close to Deserve, looking around wildly.

Song was curled up against Velvet, shivering. "I'm scared," She whimpered as Velvet licked her soothingly.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Dice murmured and wrapped his black tail around Deserve and Boost. "You're safe."

"What if we won't be?" Song whimpered. "What if the thunder hurts us?"

"Or shadowy cats?" Deserve rasped.

Dice laid down against Velvet, and the kits cuddled between them, looking around anxiously. "You'll always be safe," Velvet murmured softly. "We'll always have each other."

"That's right," Dice promised, gazing at them. "We're a family, and nothing will ever separate us. Not thunder, not shadowy cats, not anything."

Deserve felt a little comforted by this. *Dice and Velvet will protect us from anything...* He looked beside him at Boost and Song, who were snuggled against their mother. *And I won't let anything happen to Boost and Song.* He curled up against them and slowly settled into the hay, letting out a soft sigh of content. He was safe in the barn,

surrounded by the cats he loved. *It's okay...*

Chapter 5

The rain had continued on and off for a few days. Deserve had grown used to falling asleep to the gentle patter of rain on the roof of the barn. But yesterday afternoon, the sun had come out for the first time in days.

Deserve lay curled up with his siblings, his eyes closed as he tried to fall asleep. But he'd almost forgotten how to fall asleep to silence. His ears longed for the calming sound of rainfall. He let out a sigh and rolled onto his back in the hay, staring up at the roof of the barn. *It's no use. I'm not really tired anyway.* He glanced over at Boost and Song. They were cuddled together, their flanks rising and falling as they slept. *I wish they were awake to play with me.* Behind them, Velvet was sound asleep as well.

He looked the other way, expecting to see his father laying in his usual spot in the hay. But to his surprise, it was empty. He blinked and sat up, looking around. *Where is he?* He looked around the shadowy barn, but couldn't see Dice anywhere. He must be outside... But why? He decided to find out.

He cautiously padded out of his nest. When he stepped out of the hay and onto the cold floor of the barn, he looked over his shoulder warily. The others were still sound asleep. He looked ahead and continued stepping lightly and carefully to avoid waking up his mother and siblings.

When he reached the exit of the barn, he hesitated, staring out uneasily. *I've never been outside on my own before...* But the urge to find his father gave him courage. *I can do this... Dice is out there anyway, I won't be alone.* He nervously stepped out into the darkness, looking around the dark empty field. The only sound was the repetitive chirping of crickets in the cold grass. He scanned the area for his father.

"Dad?" He whispered. There was no response. He hesitated before padding around the corner of the barn, his heart thumping

nervously. *What if the forest cats jump out and get me?* His eyes darted around. He tried not to give in to the fear that was urging him to turn and flee to the safety of the barn. *There's nothing to be afraid of... There are no forest cats here*. He continued forward slowly, looking around anxiously. Suddenly, he caught sight of his father's black and white pelt. He had his back to Deserve.

Dice! He started toward him, then stopped. His father was crouched low to the ground, very slowly creeping forward through the grass. He looked very focused on something. *Is he hunting?*Deserve sat down, tilting his head curiously as he watched. *I've never seen him hunt before...*He was fascinated as he watched him stalk forward, his tail low but raised above the grass.

Dice suddenly pounced and crouched in the grass for a moment. Deserve waved his tail excitedly as he watched his father stand back up, holding a dead mouse in his jaws.

Wow! He caught a mouse! Deserve eagerly raced over to him. "That was incredible!" He exclaimed excitedly.

His father spun around and dropped the mouse, his yellow eyes lighting with surprise. He relaxed when he saw that it was his kit. "Deserve!" He let out a sigh, his fur flattening as he calmed. "You scared me! What are you doing out here?" He padded over and touched his nose to Deserve's ear. "You should be sleeping."

Deserve purred. "I couldn't sleep, so I wanted to find you."

His father let out a purr. "Well, you found me." He turned and began scraping a hole in the ground with his paws. Deserve watched curiously as he took the mouse and dropped it inside before covering it with dirt.

"What are you doing?" Deserve blinked. "Aren't we going to eat it?"

Dice sat up. "Yes, but I bury everything I catch and then collect it later," He explained. "If I don't, an animal or a bird might come and take it."

"What kind of animal?" Deserve tilted his head as he stared up at

him.

"Foxes, badgers, other cats," Dice meowed. When Deserve looked alarmed, he added, "Don't worry, it's never happened before. But I like to be careful."

He relaxed a little and looked at his father in confusion. "Why are you hunting now? You always hunt during the day."

"Prey has been scarce with all the rain the past few days," Dice explained. "I decided to hunt tonight to make up the time. There is usually more prey around at night anyway."

"Oh." Deserve paused and stared at him. *Has he gotten any sleep yet?* "Aren't you tired?"

"Of course," Dice meowed, leaning over him. "But I need to hunt and provide for you and the family, right?" He let out a tired purr and licked Deserve on the head.

Deserve hesitated, "It seems like you're the only one doing all the work around here," He commented. "Why doesn't Velvet hunt too? You could take turns, and you wouldn't be so tired."

Dice hesitated, his eyes softening. "Your mother doesn't know how to hunt. She wasn't raised here like I was."

"Why don't you teach her?" Deserve asked in confusion. Surely she can learn?

He shook his black and white head. "I tried once, but she didn't want to. She refuses to kill anything, including prey. It's admirable, but..." He paused. "It's the way things are."

Deserve felt a pang of sympathy. Dice works so hard hunting for five cats all on his own. I wish I could do something to help. An idea popped in his head. He looked at his father eagerly. "What if you teach me how to hunt?" He asked hopefully. "I could help you, and we could hunt together!"

To his disappointment, his father shook his head. "Deserve, this is my responsibility, not yours. You're too young."

"But I want to hunt!" Deserve protested. "I want to be just like you!"

Dice's yellow eyes grew warm. "Well... I've always wanted to teach my kits how to hunt someday. But I imagined it would be when you're older. You're only about three times the size of a mouse yourself!"

"Please!" Deserve begged, jumping up and down eagerly. "Please, show me how to be a great hunter like you!"

His father was quiet for a moment, and Deserve held his breath. At last, he let out a purr. "Alright." He stared at his son. "But remember, you don't have to help me feed everyone, at least not until you're older."

Okay!" Deserve purred, nodding vigorously. "I promise, I'll remember!"

"Alright," Dice meowed and crouched. "Try to copy me. See how I'm staying low to the ground, but not letting my tail touch the grass?"

Deserve nodded as he crouched beside him, staring at his tail. "Why do you do that?"

"If your tail moves against the grass or leaves, the prey will hear you and run away," He explained. He paused and gently pushed Deserve lower to the ground with his paw. "A bit lower, and don't stick your rear in the air."

Deserve obeyed, studying his father to make sure he was in the correct position.

"Very good!" Dice purred. "Now stalk forward, very slowly." He did so. "Stay low to the ground, and be careful not to disturb and twigs or stones that might be in the way."

Okay! Deserve carefully crept forward until he was crouched beside his father.

"Careful, you're losing your posture." He touched Deserve's back with his tail. "The ground is your friend. Stay close to it."

He chuckled and watched as his father continued his demonstration. "See that long piece of grass up there?" Dice meowed, nodding up ahead.

Deserve nodded, fixing his eyes on it.

"We're going to pretend that's a mouse," Dice told him as he crept forward. "Keep stalking until you're close enough. Then, when the moment is right..." He suddenly sprang into the air and landed in front of the grass, planting his forepaws on it. "Pounce!" He got up and stepped back, watching Deserve. "Your turn."

Deserve narrowed his eyes, waving his tail in the air excitedly before grunting and leaping into the air, but he misjudged the distance. He missed the long blade of grass and stumbled awkwardly a few mouse lengths from it. "Ugh!"

"Not bad," Dice purred, padding over and gently nudging him to his paws. "But you misjudged the jump. You also need to keep your tail still."

He ducked his head, embarrassed and disappointed in himself. "Sorry," He mumbled. "Maybe I won't be so good at this."

"Don't be silly!" Dice licked his head. "Never give up. You can learn how to do anything if you put your mind to it." He nudged Deserve. "Let's try again."

Deserve hesitated, feeling doubtful. *I don't think I'll ever do this right...*

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"I did it!" Deserve let out a triumphant yowl as he landed in the grass, planting his forepaws on the longer blades. "I did it!" He looked back at Dice excitedly. "Did you see that? Did I do good?"

"That was excellent!" Dice purred and padded over to him, looking proud. "Well done! You're a natural."

Deserve stood up, waving his tail. "I must get it from you," He purred. It had taken at least ten tries, but finally, he'd done it right.

His father chuckled and gazed at him. "Are you ready to try it for real?"

"Yes!" Deserve exclaimed. "Let's find a mouse!" He looked around eagerly.

"Shh!" Dice purred. "You'll scare away any mice if you're yowling at them." He paused and sniffed the air. After a moment, he twitched his ear and looked toward the back corner of the barn. "Over there." They crept closer, and Deserve spotted the tiny creature sitting in the grass, nibbling on a seed. "See it?"

Deserve nodded. "Yeah!" His eyes were locked on the mouse.

"Go on," Dice murmured and stepped back to watch. "Remember what I taught you."

He dropped into a hunting crouch, his eyes fixed on the mouse. He quickly checked his position. *Stay low... Tail above the ground...* He slowly crept forward, watching where he put his paws. Don't step on any twigs or stones... He paused when he decided he was close enough and crouched lower into the grass. He narrowed his eyes at the tiny creature, imagining it was the long blade of grass he'd practiced on earlier. *Okay... One... Two... Three...*

Now!

He leaped at the mouse and caught it in his claws. He was startled at how big it was. Dice was right, he was only about three times it's size. The mouse squeaked in alarm and struggled, kicking its feet at him. Ah! Deserve pushed it onto its stomach and pinned it. He panicked for a moment, unsure of what to do. Then he remembered the teeth marks he always saw in the prey Dice brought back for them.

"Very good!" Dice praised from behind him. "Now to kill-"

Deserve lunged down at the mouse and bit into it's neck, startled at the salty tang of blood on his tongue and the feeling of his teeth breaking through flesh. The mouse jerked and let out a squeak of pain under him. It twitched once before going limp. He released it

and stepped back, his heart racing. *Wow!* The thrill of the hunt excited him. "I got it!"

"Deserve!"

He turned to his father eagerly, expecting him to be pleased with his catch. But instead, he looked shocked, his eyes wide. "How did you do that?"

"What?" Deserve blinked.

"The killing bite." Dice stared at him. "I never showed you how to do it."

He grew uneasy. *Did I do something wrong? Is he upset?* "I-I guess I figured it out on my own," He stammered nervously. "From watching you."

Dice stared at him for a moment longer. Then he let out a purr and hurried over to him, nuzzling him. "Your first catch! I'm so proud of you!"

Deserve purred loudly and rubbed his head against Dice's muzzle. "Did I do everything right?"

"You did," His father purred loudly, gazing down at him proudly. "You're a natural hunter, Deserve."

He purred happily, waving his tail. "Can we hunt together sometime? Please! Maybe tomorrow?"

Dice's eyes glowed. "Of course we can." He looked up at the dark sky. "Now, you should go to sleep," He purred. "Bring your mouse into the barn. In the morning, you can give it to Velvet and surprise her."

"Okay!" Deserve perked up. Wait till she sees! And Boost and Song! He started toward his mouse to pick it up.

"Oh, and Deserve?" Dice called. He paused, looking back at his father. "You might want to clean the blood from your muzzle." His yellow eyes gleamed with amusement. "You'll give your mother a

heart attack if she sees you like that.

Deserve purred in amusement. "Okay, dad," He licked his muzzle clean. The blood tasted nice and salty. He picked up his mouse and ran off, waving his tail at his father, who purred as he watched him go.

He ran into the barn and looked around. Everyone was still asleep. He ran behind a pile of hay and tucked his mouse behind it. I'll show them in the morning! He gazed down at it proudly before he turned and headed to his nest.

He curled up with his siblings, purring loudly. *I can't wait to go hunting with Dice all the time! He was so proud of me!* He imagined returning to the barn with prey for his mother siblings. What a great feeling it must be! Maybe he'd even catch something for Dice. *He wouldn't expect that! I hope I become a great hunter just like him, and take care of my family!*

Chapter 6

Morning sunlight shone into the barn. Deserve purred in content as the rays warmed his fur. It hadn't been this warm in days. He rolled over in the hay. *What a nice morning...*

"About time you woke up!" Boost snorted, and he opened his eyes to see his siblings standing over him, staring down at him in amusement.

Song purred. "Hey sleepyhead!"

I slept in! Deserve yawned and rolled to his paws, shaking bits of hay from his fur. Velvet lay beside him. "Good morning," She purred, leaning over and licking his head. "You slept a while. Did you not sleep well last night?"

"I did..." Deserve blinked away sleep. *Didn't I?* He suddenly remembered last night. *My mouse!* He leaped to his paws. "I have a surprise for you!" He purred.

Velvet purred, her blue eyes gleaming. "Do you?"

"Yup!" He raced past his littermates across the barn to the pile of hay where he'd left his mouse. He found the dead creature right where he left it. He picked it up in his mouth and trotted back to his mother, his head held high.

Velvet purred as he dropped it in front of her. "Where did you get that?"

"I caught it last night!" Deserve purred proudly.

Her eyes widened, flashing with surprise. "Really? All by yourself?" Beside her, Boost and Song looked amused as though they didn't believe him.

"Yup! Dice taught me last night!" He meowed happily, his tail high in the air. "It's for you!" He nudged it toward his mother.

Boost rolled his eyes. "You didn't catch that!"

"Yeah, you couldn't kill a mouse," Song added.

"He did."

They looked up to see Dice padding into the barn, his yellow eyes shining. "He caught his first mouse last night," He told Velvet, unable to hide the pride in his voice. "He learns very quickly, and he's going to be a great hunter when he's older." He looked down at Deserve warmly. "He already is."

Deserve's heart burned with pride and happiness at his father's praise. He sat down and puffed out his chest.

Velvet purred softly. "My little Deserve hunting! I never thought I'd see the day." She gazed at him proudly. "You're going to be just like your father."

Really? I want to be! He's the best cat ever! Deserve stared at her happily. "I hope so!"

Boost and Song looked jealous at all the attention Deserve was getting. "I could hunt too," Boost protested, leaping to Deserve's side. "I bet I'd be even better than you!"

"No way!" Deserve playfully nudged his brother.

"I want to hunt too!" Song jumped in, looking up at Dice curiously. "Will you teach me too?"

"And me!" Boost added.

Dice let out a purr. "Of course!" He gazed down at them proudly. "Why don't I show you both tonight?"

"Awesome!" Boost jumped up and down excitedly, his tabby tail high in the air. "I can't wait!"

Song purred happily. "I'm going to be the best hunter!" She looked back at her mother hopefully. "Won't I?"

"Of course," Velvet purred and nuzzled her. "You'll all be wonderful hunters."

It would be fun to go hunting with Boost and Song! Deserve purred. "We could have competitions to see who catches the most prey!"

"Ooh!" Song looked excited.

"I'd win!" Boost raised his chin.

Deserve rolled his eyes. "Maybe they should have called you 'Boast' instead of 'Boost'."

His brother let out a playful growl and tackled him. Deserve laughed and battered Boost's striped flank with his paws.

Song watched and rolled her eyes. "Toms!"

"Kits!" Velvet purred and stood up in her nest. "Why don't we play in the field? It's such a nice day outside."

"Yeah!" Boost and Deserve leaped apart and ran toward the exit of the barn. Song raced after them, while Velvet followed more slowly.

Deserve paused and turned, looking back at his father who was padding toward their nest. "Aren't you coming?"

Dice paused and looked back at him. "I was going to take a nap," He meowed. "I've been out hunting all night."

"Oh, okay," He understood. He couldn't imagine how tired his father was. "Good night!" He turned and ran after the others while Dice settled in his nest, letting out a sigh of content.

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Deserve and his littermates ran around in the field, laughing as they played together. Velvet lay a little ways away from them, basking in the warm sunlight.

"I'm too quick for you, Deserve!" Song purred as she ran through the warm golden grass.

"Don't be so sure!" Deserve purred back and charged after her happily.

Boost was pouncing on a grasshopper. He paused and looked at Deserve. "Just because you can hunt doesn't mean you can run!" He teased.

"Ha!" Deserve pounced on Song's back and rolled her over into the grass.

She laughed and batted her white paws at his ears. "Hey!" She pushed him over and gently bit his ear.

Boost leaped into them, knocking Song away. "Haha!" He and Song rolled together through the grass.

"Ooh look, a Boost mouse!" Deserve let out a playful growl and sprang onto his brother's back, pinning him.

"Oof!" Boost grunted and twisted, rolling Deserve off of him. Song watched and giggled.

The kits laughed and yowled as they continued to play.

Deserve heard Velvet let out a purr. "Dice!" He broke away from his siblings and turned to see his father padding over to them.

"Dad!" Deserve ran to him and purred, arching his back and rubbing his side against his leg. "I thought you were resting?"

Dice purred. "I didn't want to miss all the fun." He settled beside Velvet and purred. "The warm grass feels nice."

"Dad!" Boost and Song noticed his arrival and raced over. Boost jumped on his back, while Song cuddled against his side.

Deserve let out a purr of happiness. "Now we're all together!"

The kits tumbled off of their father and ran to Velvet as he sat up. Deserve jumped at his fluffy white chest and laughed. "Got you!"

Dice chuckled and fell over onto his back. "So you did." He looked

at him. "How about after I show your brother and sister how to hunt mice, I teach you how to catch birds?"

"Yes!" He exclaimed eagerly. "That would be great!" He rested his chin on his father's chest and gazed at him happily. "Do you think I can do it?"

Dice purred and nuzzled him. "Of course you can! I'll teach you everything I know, and you'll be a better hunter than me someday."

"You really think so?" Deserve asked hopefully. "How can any cat be a better hunter than you?"

"You will be, because you're my kit," Dice purred. "You'll be the best hunter around."

Deserve hesitated. "What if I forget something?"

"Then I'll be there to help you," His father purred and licked his head. "Always."

He purred and laid down on Dice's chest, getting comfortable. He looked over and saw Boost and Song playing beside Velvet. Their mother gazed at them lovingly.

Deserve let out a purr, happiness warming him from his ears to his tail. He closed his eyes as he and his family relaxed in the sun. It was a great, warm day, and he was with the cats who meant everything to him.*Everything is perfect!*

Chapter 7

"I can't wait!"

"I'm going to be the best hunter ever!"

Deserve watched his littermates leap around the barn excitedly, amused and happy for them. "You'll be great!" He looked to the exit of the barn. Outside, the sun was setting, casting long dark shadows inside the barn. It was almost time for Dice to show his siblings how to hunt as he'd promised earlier.

Song bounced around in the hay, her white tail in the air. "I'm going to catch a hundred mice!" She declared.

"Oh, yeah?" Boost fluffed up his fur. "Well, I'll catch a thousand!"

"Then I'll catch a million!" She crouched and wiggled her haunches. "Starting with you!" She pounced on him, and he let out a startled meow.

Deserve let out a purr of amusement as he watched them play together. He looked behind him. Velvet was sitting near their nest, gazing at the kits. He was surprised to see sadness brimming in her eyes. She looked distant. "Are you okay?" He asked worriedly.

"Hmm?" Velvet blinked out of her thoughts and looked down at Deserve. "Oh, yes."

He tilted his head. "You look sad." *Did we do something wrong?*

Velvet let out a soft purr. "It's just hard seeing my kits growing up." She leaned down and rasped her pink tongue over his head. "I never

imagined you'd be hunting like your father."

Deserve blinked. "Do you wish we didn't?" He remembered how Dice had told him that Velvet didn't like to kill anything. *Does it upset her that we will kill prey?*

"No, dear," She murmured, her blue eyes warm. "I know you all need to grow up eventually and learn to take care of yourselves."

He stared up at her. "I hope I make you proud of me."

His mother purred softly. "I already am."

"Dice!" His siblings suddenly yowled.

Deserve turned to see his siblings race over to the exit of the barn. Dice had just arrived, holding several mice by their tails. He let out a muffled purr as Boost and Song excitedly weaved around his legs. He gently shooed them away with one paw as he padded further into the barn.

"Can we go now?" Boost asked excitedly, bounding alongside his father. "Please!"

Song stared at him eagerly as Dice dropped his mice by a pile of hay. "Can we go for our hunting lesson?"

Dice sat down beside Velvet, looking down at them in amusement. "Well, I don't know... Have you been good?"

"Yes!" Song exclaimed, bouncing up and down. "All day! Even Boost!"

Boost nodded, staring up at his father with glowing yellow eyes. "Yeah!"

Dice let out a purr. "In that case, I think it's time for a hunting lesson."

"Yeah!" The kits jumped up and down, racing toward the exit of the barn. Dice padded after them, his black tail high in the air. Deserve eagerly ran after him.

His father paused and looked over his shoulder at Velvet. "Are you coming?" He asked. Deserve paused and skidded to a halt, looking back at her.

Velvet looked hesitant. "I'm not sure I want to see that..."

"Come on, it's their first hunt!" Dice urged, looking excited. "You missed Deserve's, but you can still see Boost and Song have their moment."

"Well..." Velvet meowed uncertainly.

Deserve looked up at her hopefully. "Please! You can watch me hunt too!"

She gazed at him for a moment and let out a purr as she stood. "Alright, I suppose I can watch."

"Yay!" Deserve ran out of the barn, and his parents followed.

Song and Boost were standing further into the field, looking impatient. Their eyes shone with excitement. "Come on, dad!"

"Okay, okay," Dice purred as he neared them. Deserve hurried to join his siblings, while Velvet sat down and lifted her front leg, beginning to lick her paw.

Deserve looked beside him. Boost and Song looked very excited, their tails in the air and eyes shining. *This is going to be great!* He thought happily.

"Alright." Dice dropped into a crouch. "So, first you-" He broke off, his eyes flashing across the field.

Deserve blinked. "What is it?" He followed his father's gaze and froze, his eyes widening.

A huge dark brown bird was slowly walking in the field close to the thunderpath, bobbing its head as it moved. It was bigger than any bird Deserve had ever seen. He couldn't be sure from the distance, but it looked like it was the size of a fully grown cat, perhaps even bigger.

"Whoa!" Boost breathed as he and Song stared at the creature. "What is that thing?"

Velvet's eyes widened. "A turkey," She gasped. "They're delicious!"

Deserve watched the wild turkey in amazement. "That looks big enough to feed all of us for days!"

"It certainly would be." Dice's attention was fixed on the turkey, the tip of his tail twitching slowly back and forth. "And it would mean I wouldn't have to hunt for a few days."

"Yes!" Deserve brightened excitedly. "You could rest and spend more time with us!"

Boost and Song exchanged an excited look, while Velvet licked her lips. "I haven't had turkey in seasons!"

"You will in a few moments," Dice promised, turning away. "I'll be right back with the best meal we've had in moons!" He dropped into a crouch and slowly began heading toward the turkey.

Deserve stood beside his littermates, watching their father excitedly. Velvet sat with them, her eyes wide and hopeful as she watched him. I wonder what turkey tastes like? He thought, looking beside him at Song. "I can't wait to try it!" He whispered.

"Me too!" Song purred. "I bet it's tasty!"

He watched as his father crept closer to the turkey, then paused, crouching lower into the grass. Deserve guessed he was keeping a fair distance to avoid scaring it away. The turkey looked unaware of him, continuing to step slowly through the grass. Dice slowly began circling it from a distance, moving closer.

The turkey twitched it's head back, detecting him. It quickly walked closer to the thunderpath and onto the gravel lining the road. His father followed, and the turkey walked onto the thunderpath, pausing in the middle. Dice hesitated for a moment, then followed it onto the thunderpath, stalking toward it even more slowly and carefully then before.

"Oh no..." Velvet whispered. "If he follows it across the thunderpath..."

Deserve was confused for a moment, following his mother's gaze to the pine trees on the other side. Suddenly, he understood. *That's where those forest cats live! If they catch Dice on their territory, they'll rip him to shreds!* His fur prickled with fear for his father. *He can't let it reach the other side!*

"Dice!" Velvet called softly, her eyes round with worry. "Come back!"

But Dice wasn't going to lose this catch. If he heard her, he didn't listen. He crept forward a few inches, his eyes locked on the turkey. Deserve couldn't tell if he was close enough to leap at it. *If he was, he would have done it by now.* He reminded himself.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and flicked his gaze to it. He froze, his fur bristling. A twoleg monster was racing along the thunderpath. It was still far away, but it was getting closer and closer to Dice and the turkey.

"Look!" Deserve gasped out, and his mother and siblings looked at it in alarm.

Velvet leaped to her paws. "Dice!" She called out anxiously. "Stop!"

Dice didn't abandon the hunt, remaining crouched in the middle of the thunderpath.

Deserve held his breath. "Dad!" He gasped in terror. "Come back!"

"He's going to get hit!" Song cried. "Make him come back!" She looked up at Velvet, but their mother bolted away, racing toward him.

"Dice!" She yowled as she ran. Deserve had never heard his mother sound so scared. He forced his frozen legs to move and ran after her, aware of his siblings following. *We have to stop him!*

He saw his father's head turn briefly toward the monster closing in on him. But he wasn't going to abandon the hunt. His eyes flashed

between the monster and the turkey. It was now or never. Dice grunted and launched himself at the turkey as the monster thundered toward him.

Deserve and the others froze in their tracks by the edge of the thunderpath. He looked away sharply, and half a second later he heard the monster let out a terrible screech, and a thud followed it. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling his little heart pounding rapidly, his pelt prickling with fear. *Please..!*

"Dice!" Velvet let out an earsplitting shriek of terror. "No!"

He trembled as he shakily looked up and opened his eyes. He let out a horrified cry. "Dad!"

The monster was speeding away, leaving behind the motionless body of Dice. His father lay on the thunderpath, his body twisted at an awkward angle. His fur was dirty and ruffled. Across the thunderpath, the turkey flapped it's wings as it ran away into the forest.

"No!" Deserve screeched, and he heard his siblings cry beside him. He shakily looked over at them. "It's okay," He choked. "He's just hurt!"

They didn't seem to hear them. They looked badly shocked, their eyes wide with horror.

Velvet raced over to the body. "Dice?" She whimpered and grasped him by his scruff, backing up and dragging him out of the thunderpath.

"Is he okay?" Song let out a cry as Velvet reached them with Dice's body. She let go of his scruff, and his head fell limp into the grass. Deserve trembled as he stared at his father. His eyes were half open and sightless, his mouth open slightly. Tire marks dirtied his black and white fur. *He can't be... No, he's not...!*

"Dad?" Boost whimpered. "Get up!"

Velvet crouched beside Dice's body, trembling as she lapped at his face and nudged him. "Dice?" She whimpered. "Please..!" He didn't

move.

Deserve trembled as he staggered forward and nudged Dice's face with his nose. "D-dad?" He sobbed. His father reeked of the thunderpath. "You've gotta get up!"

Song whimpered and curled up against Dice's belly, trembling. Boost stumbled to Deserve's side, staring at his father. "He's dead, isn't he?" He cried.

The words pierced his heart like thorns. Deserve shakily raised his eyes to his mother. "I-is he...?" He croaked.

"He... He can't..." Velvet didn't respond for a moment. Then she let out a wail of grief and pushed her face into Dice's fur, giving a small nod.

Boost and Song whimpered and pressed close to their father. Deserve felt dizzy. *This can't be real... This is just a horrible nightmare, like the one with the shadowy cats...* But he knew he was lying to himself. He knew this was reality. A horrible reality.

They stayed like that, huddled around Dice's body for a long while. No cat spoke. The occasional sobbing broke the silence. Deserve pressed his muzzle into his father's fur. I need you..! You're my dad!

After what felt like forever, Velvet slowly raised her head. "Kits..." She rasped. "Kits, go into the barn and rest... I... I need to bury Dice."

Deserve's heart throbbed. He and his littermates didn't object. They slowly moved away from the body and began heading toward the barn. He paused and looked over his shoulder to see his father one last time. *Goodbye, dad...* He thought, feeling his heart shatter into a million pieces. *I love you...*

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It was dark now, stars beginning to appear in the night sky. Deserve and his siblings padded into their nest and sat down. Boost stared down at his paws, his yellow eyes brimming with grief and heartache. Song was hunched over and whimpering.

Deserve wanted to wail his heart out. But he wanted to be strong for his family. He had to be. He shifted closer to his sister and rubbed his head against hers. "It's okay," He managed to speak, his voice dry and cracking. "It's going to be okay."

"How can it be okay?" Song cried and pressed against him. "Dad is dead!"

Boost slowly laid down and rested his chin on his paws. "I miss him already..."

Deserve turned and licked his brother's ear, and the three kits huddled together in their nest of hay. He closed his eyes, feeling numb and heartbroken. *He went after the turkey so he could rest and spend more time with us, just for a few days... It did the opposite. Now he'll never spend any time with us ever again.* The thought broke his heart, and he pressed into the hay, whimpering. After a long while, he heard movement from the entrance of the barn and flicked an ear, slowly turning toward it.

Velvet was slowly padding into the barn, her paws stained with dirt. He knew she had buried Dice.

"Mom!" Song looked at her sadly. "Please come!"

She looked at them, her blue eyes exhausted and numb with grief. "Kits..." She murmured. "Oh, kits..." She hurried to them and curled up in the nest. Deserve and his siblings immediately huddled against her. Deserve shut his eyes, trembling as he pressed into her soft white fur. *Please don't ever leave us! We need you.. You're all we have now...*

Boost let out a sob, and Velvet wrapped her tail around him. "Shhh, it's alright..." She murmured, her voice dry and edged with pain. "I'm here..."

"What are we going to do without him?" Deserve whispered as he shivered. "Without Dice?"

Velvet looked distant, her light blue eyes numb. "I... I don't know..." She rasped. She curled herself around her kits, and they cuddled

together, sobbing and trembling.

Deserve closed his eyes, trying to seek comfort in the warmth of his family around him. But it didn't take away the pain in his heart. He didn't know what was going to happen. He only knew one thing. *Nothing is ever going to be the same again...*

Chapter 8

Deserve slowly padded around through the field, sniffing for prey. *Come on, there has to be a mouse around here somewhere!* He sensed something and turned his head sharply. There in the grass was a little gray mouse, nibbling on a seed. *Yes!* He dropped into the hunting crouch Dice had taught him and slowly began stalking toward it.

It was early morning. Four days had passed since Dice's death. Life in the barn was becoming more and more difficult. Their father had been the only cat providing food for them, and yesterday they'd eaten the last of the mice he had caught before he died. Deserve had been ready to take on the responsibilities of hunting for his family, but Velvet refused to let him. She'd been trying to figure out how to hunt, but she was making little to no success. She couldn't crouch or leap properly.

Velvet didn't know he was hunting now. He snuck away very early this morning while she and his siblings were asleep. He sprang at the mouse and trapped it in his claws, swiftly biting into it's neck. The mouse squeaked and went limp.

It's small, but it'll feed some of them. Maybe Boost and Song if they share. He picked up the mouse and ran back toward the barn. He slowed his pace as he passed a patch of dirt outside the barn, his heart aching. It was Dice's grave. *I'll take care of Velvet, Boost, and Song.* He told him silently. *I promise.* He forced his gaze away from the grave and hurried to the barn entrance.

He saw that everyone was awake now. Boost and Song were padding around slowly, pawing at pieces of hay on the wooden floor. Deserve's heart sunk. The barn used to be such a happy, fun place, full of laughter and love. But now, all of that had been replaced by sorrow and sadness. He noticed how thin his siblings looked. He guessed that he was beginning to lose weight too. They had only been eating one meal a day to make the last of the mice

last, up until last night, when they'd run out. They hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon.

"I'm so hungry!" Song was meowing sadly, looking around desperately. "Isn't there something left? Anything?"

Boost shook his head, his ears drooping. "No." His stomach growled. "I'm starving too."

Velvet sat hunched over in her nest, staring at her kits helplessly.

Deserve's heart broke seeing his brother and sister so hungry. He padded into the barn and hurried over to them, dropping the mouse in front of them. "Here, you guys can have this." He meowed.

Boost and Song stared at the mouse in surprise, delight flickering in their eyes. They crouched over it, but hesitated. Song looked up at Deserve. "Aren't you hungry too?" She asked quietly.

Deserve's stomach rumbled at the scent of the mouse. He was starving. But he needed to put his family first. He shook his head. "I'm fine." He lied. "You two share it."

Song let out a purr and eagerly dug into the mouse. Boost looked at Deserve, his usually playful yellow eyes dull and saddened. "Thanks, Deserve," He murmured and shifted close to Song as he took a bite out of the mouse. Deserve sat down and watched them.

"There you are!" Velvet stared at him. "I told you not to go hunting!"

Deserve stared up at her. "I had to!" He insisted. "I can't let you all starve!" He stood and started back toward the barn exit. "I'll go catch something for you."

"No!" Velvet called, and he paused, turning back to her. "I won't let you become the hunter for this family."

"Why not? I can do it!" He protested desperately. "I can be just like Dice and provide for you all! I know how to hunt, and-"

"Deserve!" His mother's voice cracked as she spoke, her blue eyes filled with sadness. "Your father didn't show it often, but his job to

hunt and provide for us day and night caused him a lot of stress. He was always exhausted." She hung her head. "You're only a kit. I won't let you take on such responsibilities. I won't put that kind of pressure on you."

His siblings paused from eating and exchanged a look. "Then... What do we do?" Boost asked quietly.

"We're going to starve if Deserve can't hunt for us!" Song whimpered.

Deserve's mind raced as he tried to think of another option. "What if Boost and Song hunt too?" He suggested. "I can teach them."

"Yeah!" Boost looked up at Velvet hopefully. "We could divide up the work!"

But his mother shook her head sadly. "You're only kits," She whispered. "I'm your mother. I'm supposed to take care of you, not the other way around."

"Then at least let me show you how to hunt!" Deserve urged desperately. "Then you can do the hunting."

She looked hesitant. "I... Dice tried to show me how before you were born. I couldn't do it." She looked ashamed.

"Then try again!" Deserve stared at her. "Please, let me show you. You can do it, I know you can!" Boost and Song padded up beside him, looking up at their mother pleadingly.

Velvet still looked doubtful. But she slowly nodded. "Alright, Deserve..." A determined look flashed in her eyes. "I can do this."

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"No, you're still not doing it right." Deserve stared beside him at his mother. She was crouched, but not low enough to the grass, and her rump was high in the air. "Lower, and don't stick your rear in the air."

Velvet looked confused. "Like this?" She pressed herself to the

ground, her tail falling into the grass.

He let out a sigh. "No, your tail has to be above the ground. Look what I'm doing."

They'd been at it all afternoon, and Velvet wasn't making any progress. Deserve knew it would be difficult. His mother had been born a kittypet, and spent most of her life being fed by Dice. She'd never needed to catch her own food. And being an older cat made it more difficult to learn. Boost and Song were sitting in the grass by the side of the barn, looking bored and disappointed.

Maybe it's hopeless. Deserve thought sadly. *Maybe she-* He spotted something in the grass ahead of them, a mouse. An idea popped in his head. "I have an idea!" He stood and looked at Velvet. "You don't have to learn how to stalk mice. We can do that part for you!"

Velvet blinked as she sat up. "What do you mean, dear?"

"We can chase mice toward you," He explained. "And you can catch them!" He looked at his siblings eagerly. "We can make a game out of it!"

Song's ears perked up. "Ooh! That sounds like it could work!"

"Yeah!" Boost nodded.

Velvet looked thoughtful. "That's a good idea!" She meowed. "I think I could manage that."

"Great!" Deserve purred. Maybe everything will be okay now! "I'll go sneak up on that mouse and scare it toward you." He turned and ran around the barn so that he could sneak up behind the mouse. When he rounded the last corner, he peered out. It was still there, sniffing around the grass. His mother was crouched in the grass, her blue eyes fixed on the rodent.

She's ready. Perfect! He charged toward the mouse. It immediately spun and fled, and Deserve bounded after it, careful to keep it heading in the right direction.

When it got closer to Velvet, she sat up sharply, raising her paw in

surprise. "Oh!"

"Get it!" Deserve gasped, and his mother swiftly slammed her paws down on it. The mouse squeaked and struggled in her grip, but she had it pinned.

Boost and Song leaped up and down excitedly. "Yes!"

"You did it!" Boost yowled happily.

Velvet stared down at the mouse as it struggled.

"Kill it!" Deserve exclaimed. "Quick, bite it's neck!" When his mother continued to hesitate, he stared at her in bewilderment. "What are you doing?"

"I..." Velvet shut her eyes. "I can't do it... I can't kill..." She released the mouse, and Deserve and his siblings watched in shock as it scurried away. *She let it go!* She hung her head and let out a wail of despair. "What kind of mother am I?" She cried heavily. "I'd rather let my kits starve than kill a mouse!"

Deserve and his siblings watched in stunned silence. *I can't believe she can't do it..!*

His mother crouched and sobbed. "I'm sorry, Dice! I'm sorry I can't take care of our kits!"

I've never seen her so upset! It broke his heart in two. He slowly padded up to her and rubbed his head against hers. Boost and Song slowly joined them, huddling against their mother and licking her to comfort her.

"It's not your fault," Deserve rasped. "I-I guess not every cat is a hunter." But his heart was racing with fear. *What are we going to do? Are we all going to starve?*

***

That night, Deserve and his siblings lay curled up in their nest of hay Their stomachs growled. Boost and Song hadn't eaten since this morning. Deserve hadn't eaten since yesterday. But he was too

worried to think about his hunger.

He stared out the barn exit. Velvet was sitting outside with their back to them, her head low. Now and then, she would look up at the stars. She'd been very quiet since the incident with the mouse. She felt horribly ashamed of herself. Deserve wondered if she was talking to Dice, imagining him among the stars.

"I'm hungry," Boost whimpered. He sniffed at the nest. "What do you think hay tastes like?"

Song rested her head on her paws. "I don't know," She mumbled.

Boost began chewing on a piece of hay. He bristled and spat it out. "Ew! It's gross."

I wish I could catch us something... Deserve closed his eyes. *When was the last time Velvet ate? She must be even hungrier than we are.*

Velvet suddenly turned and slowly padded into the barn, her head low. Her gaze was fixed on her paws. Deserve pricked his ears.

"Mom?" Song lifted her head and stared at her. "What are we going to do?"

Boost's eyes were dull and sad. "Are we gonna die?"

Velvet stared at them, pain flashing in her eyes. "No, kits, no..." She stepped into the nest and curled herself around them. "I know what to do," She rasped. "I'll tell you about it tomorrow." She began lapping at each of her kits. "For now, I want you all to get a good night's sleep."

What are we going to do? Deserve wondered. *What does she have in mind?* He couldn't think of anything he hadn't thought of. *Maybe she's going to let me do the hunting?*

"Mom?" Song whispered, stirring in the nest.

Velvet gazed at her sadly. "Yes?"

"Even if you can't hunt, I love you." Song stared at her.

Velvet's eyes lit with heartache. "I love you too, Song," She whispered, her voice cracking. "I love all three of you, so much." She pulled her kits close to her.

"I'm scared," Boost whispered, pressing against her.

"Hush, It's going to be alright my dears," Velvet whispered and nuzzled Song as she pulled Deserve and Boost close with one paw. "I promise, it'll be alright. Just go to sleep now."

He trusted his mother. *If she says it's going to be okay, it'll be okay...* She cuddled against his mother's soft white fur. *We'll be okay...*

Chapter 9

"Kits."

Deserve woke up to his mother gently nudging him with her nose. He opened his eyes slowly, drowsy with sleep. The hay was warm beneath him. His littermates lay on either side of him, stirring against him as they awoke. Velvet sat up and gazed down at them, her eyes clouded with sadness.

What's going on? He wondered. *She never wakes us up unless it's important.* His stomach growled loudly and he swallowed, longing to taste prey. *I hope she's decided to let me hunt for us.* He sat up in his nest, looking up at his mother.

Boost stretched out and let out a sigh. He was hungry too. On the other side of Deserve, Song sat up, staring up at Velvet with sad blue eyes. "Are we going to have a meal today?"

Velvet lowered her head, looking ashamed and heartbroken at the sight of her starving kits. He suddenly noticed how frail she'd become. The outline of her ribs were almost visible through her fur. "Yes," She murmured. "We will."

"Really?" Deserve's heartbeat quickened with hope. *She changed her mind!* He stood up, looking at her excitedly. "So I can hunt for us all?"

She shook her head, and he was startled. He exchanged a puzzled look with Boost and Song. *Then what's going to happen..?*

"Then how are we going to eat?" Boost echoed his thoughts, sounding confused. "If none of us will hunt?"

Velvet was quiet for a moment. "I've made a decision." She drew in a deep breath before meeting the anxious gaze of her kits. "Do you remember the forest cats me and Dice told you about?" She asked softly.

Deserve blinked. "Yes?" *What do they have to do with anything?*

"Well... We're going to join them," She meowed quietly. "We cannot stay in the barn any longer."

What? His heart leaped with alarm. Beside him, his siblings leaped to their paws, eyes lit with protest.

"No!" Boost gasped in horror. "We can't leave!

Song sunk into the nest of hay as though refusing to abandon it. "This is our home!" She wailed. "Why would we want to go live in the forest?"

"You said those cats were dangerous!" Deserve added, his fur bristling with fear. "They'll kill us!" *Why would she want to take us to those monsters? How could she think it's a good idea?*

"Or make us one of them!" Boost jumped in, his tabby tail fluffed up. "I don't want to be a killer!"

"Kits!" Velvet soothed, her eyes filled with distress. "Please relax, it's alright. Listen to me." She gazed down at them as they stared at her in terror, hearts racing. "You remember the cat Dice told you about? Sulfur?" The kits nodded, and she went on. "He was friends with some of those cats. I didn't know him, but from what Dice told me, he was a good cat who never would have befriended a killer." She paused. "Perhaps the cats around here over-exaggerate. Perhaps they aren't that bad."

Deserve was horrified at this suggestion. *Is she crazy? They'll rip us to shreds!* "But-"

"I won't believe that any cat would turn away kits in need," Velvet murmured. "They'll take us in and hunt for us, and we'll be alright. When you're old enough, I'm sure they'll show you how to hunt too."

Boost and Song exchanged a terrified look, and Deserve stepped toward his mother, his black fur bristling. "But I know how to hunt!" He gasped. "I can hunt! Let me do the hunting for us!" His mother shook her head, and he went on desperately. "Please, I'll

take care-"

"Deserve!" Velvet snapped, and he jumped, shrinking back. *She never yells at us!* After a moment, her expression softened and filled with pain. She hung her head.

He and his siblings hurried to their mother and huddled against her. Deserve rubbed his head against her soft white belly fur, his heart twisting in pain.

It was quiet for a moment. Song pressed against her and whimpered. "I don't want to leave, mom."

Velvet bent over and licked her head gently. "Neither do I," She whispered, her voice cracking. "This place means a lot to me too." She swallowed. "But if we stay here, we'll die." The kits didn't speak. Deserve knew his siblings were just as afraid and heartbroken as he was. After a long moment, she shifted away from them. "Come on. Let's go," She meowed quietly.

Boost stared at her in alarm. "We're leaving now?"

Their mother gave a small nod. "We need food," She meowed quietly. "I won't let you starve any longer." She turned away and slowly padded toward the exit of the barn. She gazed around for a long moment.

Deserve slowly padded after her, finding himself doing the same. He raised his head and looked around the barn. His home. The place he loved. Where he belonged. He took in every piece of his beloved barn. The heaps of hay he would play hide and seek in. The old shovel Song would hide behind. The post where Velvet would count by whenever they would play. The laughter and fun they would have together. The nest of hay where he fell asleep every night, surrounded by the warmth and comfort of his mother, father, and siblings. The calming sound of the crickets outside. He saw the pile of hay where he'd hid his first mouse. The pride in his father's eyes after he caught it, and the pride he had felt bringing it to his mother. He turned to the entrance of the barn, where Dice would appear every afternoon, returning from hunting. He and his siblings would run to him and eagerly ask about his day.

He shut his eyes and hung his head. The happy memories of his life in the barn tore his heart apart. Those days were gone forever. All the happiness and fun that had once existed would disappear from this place. *I'll probably never see the barn again.* The thought broke his heart.

"Come on, kits," Velvet murmured, snapping Deserve out of his thoughts. "It's time to go."

Song slowly padded up beside Deserve, her gaze on the ground. Deserve glanced back. "Boost?" He rasped.

He saw that his brother was crouched over their nest. He turned to Deserve, holding a little bundle of hay from the nest in his mouth. He slowly joined his brother and sister, dropping it on the ground. "I-I want to bring something," He rasped, his yellow eyes clouded with heartache. "To remember our home."

Deserve felt his heart throb. "That's a good idea," He meowed quietly.

They looked to their mother. Velvet was staring around the barn, a numb expression on her face. Deserve imagined that she was thinking of all the memories she had here with Dice. The loss of both her mate and the place they'd called home together would leave a hole in her heart that could never be filled.

After a long moment, she drew in a deep breath and looked down at her kits. "Let's go," She murmured. She and his siblings slowly padded out of the barn.

Deserve cast one last look over his shoulder at the empty barn. *I'll miss this place...* After a moment, he sighed and looked away, following his family out of the barn.

As the three of them padded through the field, he felt his heart throb as he remembered the days he'd spent out here, playing in the field while his parents basked in the sunlight. He remembered the night he'd been out here with Dice, learning how to hunt. He tried to ignore these thoughts tugging at his heart. But there was one more he needed to face.

They passed Dice's grave, and Deserve stopped, staring at it sadly as his heart twisted. *He'll be all alone here...* It felt wrong to leave his father's body behind. But he knew there was no other option. He saw that the grave had also caught the attention of Velvet and his siblings. The four of them looked at it in silence. After a long moment, they slowly carried on, dragging their gazes away.

"Goodbye, dad..." Deserve whispered, his voice cracking as he forced the words out. The broken family slowly continued toward the thunderpath. Across from it lay the world of the forest cats, where their lives would continue to be altered in un-repairable ways.

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Deserve and his siblings slowly padded through the pine forest, their heads low and tails drooping. They stayed close to their mother, looking around nervously. His sadness had been quickly replaced by fear. There were strange scents everywhere, and the trees and bushes clustered all around him made him feel closed in and trapped. *I've never been in a place with so many trees before!* His eyes darted around to the shadows all around him, terrified that countless shadowy forest cats were hidden within them, waiting to leap out and attack.

Though she continued onward without hesitation, he could sense Velvet's unease and saw her white fur prickling. She's nervous too. *Is she questioning her decision?*

Song shifted closer to her, her light blue eyes wide as she looked around. "I'm scared," She whimpered.

"What if they kill us?" Deserve added nervously. Beside him, Boost didn't speak, as he was holding his bundle of hay.

Velvet looked down at them sympathetically. "It'll be alright," She murmured. "I promise. We'll all be eating fresh mice in no time."

His stomach rumbled at the mention of food, and he suddenly realized how light headed he was. The combination of sadness, fear, and lack of food was making him feel sick. *I hope she's right... I'm so*

hungry! He looked up at his mother. "How do you know we're going the right way?"

"I'm following the scent of cats," She meowed quietly, sniffing at the air. "It's getting stronger. This way."

The four of them continued deeper into the forest. Deserve lifted his head and sniffed. He could definitely smell other cats. But it was different from the scent of he and his family. There was a strange scent along with it that he couldn't identify.

Velvet was about to round a bush when she suddenly stopped and shrank back.

Deserve and his siblings quickly halted. "What?" He gasped, and they peered out around the bush. He froze at what he saw.

Forest cats!

Two cats were sitting by a wall of thorn bushes. One was a broad shouldered black tom. The other was a silver spotted she-cat. Deserve looked closer and saw that between them was a gap between the bushes. *Are they guarding it? Is that where they live?*

Suddenly, the tom's ears flicked forward, his amber eyes flashing with alarm. "Rogues!" He growled to his companion, and the two of them jumped to their paws, looking around. "I smell them."

"Come out!" The she-cat hissed. "We know you're there."

Deserve shrank back low to the ground, his heart racing in terror. *They're angry! They* are *going to kill us!* He looked up at Velvet. "We should go!" He breathed.

But to his alarm, his mother slowly stepped out and padded toward them slowly. Deserve longed to stay hidden where he was safe, but refused to let his mother face these ruffians alone. *I have to protect us!* He darted out and slunk to Velvet's side, aware of his siblings hurrying to his side.

Velvet dipped her head low and respectfully. "H-hello-"

"You're on ShadowClan territory!" The black tom snarled at Velvet, his tail lashing back and forth. "You're not welcome here!"

Deserve huddled with his siblings between their mother's paws, their eyes wide with terror and little tails fluffed up twice their size as they stared at the fierce cats. Boost was gripping his bundle of hay tighter in his jaws, trembling, while Song pressed against Velvet's leg. Their mother stood over them protectively, looking afraid.

The silver spotted she-cat looked down at them, her blue eyes lighting with surprise. "Hold on a moment, Crowmask!" She hissed at the other cat who looked ready to attack. "She has kits." She looked at Velvet as the black tom slowly flattened his fur, narrowing his eyes. "What are you doing here?" She demanded.

Crowmask? ShadowClan? Deserve was confused. *What strange names!*

Velvet was trembling a little as she met the she-cat's gaze. "M-my name is Velvet," She rasped. "I'm unable to provide for myself and my kits. We're all starving." She swallowed and stared at the forest cats pleadingly. "Please, will you take us in?"

Crowmask and she she-cat exchanged a look. "I don't trust it, Bluerain," He growled. "They could be some of Bone Shred's rogues." He glared at Velvet suspiciously. "We all know that those cats relied on him for food and shelter. Of course some would come crawling to us!"

Bone Shred? Deserve stared up at him anxiously. *What's he meowing about? We don't know any cat called* Bone Shred!

Velvet sounded just as puzzled. "I don't know what you're talking about," She meowed quietly. "I'm not one of those cats, I come from a barn."

The cats looked uncertain. "I think we should let Depthstar decide," Crowmask growled. "I'll go fetch him." He turned away. "Keep an eye on them, Bluerain."

The she-cat nodded, returning her gaze to the family. Deserve

stared up at her nervously, pressing close to his siblings. Velvet leaned over them. "It'll be alright," She whispered. "You'll see."

At least they haven't torn us to shreds yet... Deserve thought nervously.

After a few moments, Crowmask returned, followed by another cat. A powerful, very dark blue-gray tom. His eyes moved down to the kits, and Deserve tensed under his dark gaze. After a moment, he looked up at Velvet.

"Greetings," The tom meowed, his voice firm but polite. "I'm Depthstar, leader of ShadowClan. Crowmask tells me you'd like to join us?"

A leader? Deserve stared up at him nervously, his fur prickling. *I didn't know they had that... He must be very important. Does he control all the other cats here?*

Velvet dipped her head respectfully. "Y-yes, please... Me and my kits are starving," She meowed desperately. "I can't hunt. We'll die if we go any longer without food."

Depthstar was quiet for a long moment, deep in thought. Crowmask stepped to his side. "The clan is already suspicious enough of Poisonedsap. They have been since she joined us last leaf-bare." He eyed Velvet. "How will they feel if they have two strangers to worry about?"

The clan leader nodded slowly. "You have a good point, Crowmask." His dark blue eyes clouded with guilt. "I'm sorry, but I cannot allow you to join ShadowClan. I hate to turn away a queen who may very well be in need, but I must put the safety of my clan first."

Velvet's eyes lit with fear and desperation. "No! Please, you have to help us!" She begged. "My kits haven't had a good meal in days!"

Depthstar looked down. "I can't help you because I can't guarantee you can be trusted. Not only that, but you cannot hunt, and every able warrior must contribute to the clan." His gaze moved to the kits. "But I won't turn away kits in need." He looked back at Velvet.

"Your kits can stay, but you must leave our territory."

What? Deserve's heart exploded with terror. "No!" He gasped and looked up at Velvet anxiously. His mother's eyes had lit with alarm, but she didn't protest. She just stared back at the ShadowClan leader.

"Please, don't leave us!" Song pleaded, clinging to her mother's leg and staring up at her. "Please!"

Beside her, Boost had dropped the bundle of hay he was carrying, his yellow eyes filled with terror. "We need you! We can go back to the barn with you!"

"Yes!" Deserve added desperately, staring up at Velvet. "Please, please!"

Velvet stared at Depthstar. "I... I understand." She rasped. "Thank you... Please take care of them..."

"No!" Deserve shrieked, his tail fluffed up as he pawed at her leg desperately. His heart was sprinting in terror. "Take us with you!"

Depthstar dipped his head. "I promise we will."

He barely heard him as he and his littermates wailed and shrieked desperately at their mother. "Don't abandon us!" Song wailed. "Please!"

"Velvet! Mom!" Boost cried and pressed against her leg.

She stepped back, her eyes lit with pain and distress as she stared down at her kits. She looked numb and heartbroken. "Oh, kits..." She choked out. "I love you so much. Take care of each other." She stared at her kits for a long moment, then let out a sob. She turned and stumbled before she broke into a run.

"No!" Deserve screeched as he watched Velvet race away and disappear into the trees. "No! No!" His whole heart felt ready to shatter. *She's leaving us! She can't leave us! No! No!*

"Mom!" Song let out a wail of terror. "Take us with you! Please!"

Beside her, Boost screeched out.

"Velvet!" Deserve yowled and started to leap in the direction his mother had gone, but Depthstar leaned over and grabbed him by the scruff, lifting him up off the ground. "No!" He screeched, struggling to free himself. "Let me go! How could you do this!? Mom!" He felt blind with terror, his voice getting dry from yowling and screeching.

He saw that Bluerain was scooping up Song, while Crowmask took Boost, leaving behind the bundle of hay. The kits wailed and struggled, and Deserve stared out into the forest, desperate to get to his mother.

"No!" He screeched desperately as the clan cats carried them through the thorn tunnel, and the forest disappeared from sight.

Chapter 10

Deserve trembled, his heart pounding madly at his chest as Depthstar rested him on the ground. Beside him, Bluerain and Crowmask dropped Boost and Song beside him. The three kits immediately huddled together.

"She left us!" Song cried, her eyes round with distress. "Mom's gone!"

Boost's fur was bristling as he stood, frozen with shock. "She has to come back!"

This can't be real... This can't be happening! Deserve could hardly think straight as waves of terror and shock washed over him. *It can't! How could she- How could they-* He jerked his head up to the ShadowClan leader as he sat down and looked at them. "How could you?" He cried out, anger pulsing through him. "You sent our mother away!"

"I thought we'd at least still be together!" Song wailed. "Now we're all alone!" She and Boost pressed close together, whimpering while Deserve glared up at Depthstar, trembling.

The ShadowClan leader stared down at the kits, his eyes filled with sadness, maybe even some regret. "You won't be alone," He promised gently. "You'll be safe and well fed here in ShadowClan."

But we'll never be happy! Deserve thought miserably. *We've lost our home, our parents, everything!*

Beside Depthstar, Bluerain was gazing down at the kits sympathetically. "Everything will be alright," She murmured. Beside her, even Crowmask looked saddened at the sight of the heartbroken kits.

But the silver she-cat's words didn't comfort Deserve. *Nothing will be alright! Nothing will be alright ever again!*

"I'll call a clan meeting." Depthstar turned away and headed toward a large rock at the side of the clearing.

For the first time, Deserve began to take notice of his surroundings. He and his siblings sat toward the front of a large clearing. Pine needles covered the ground. He saw several different dens, one or two built in the shelter of rocks and boulders, while others were made out of bushes and woven branches. *We have to sleep in there?*

He grew nervous when he saw how many cats were in the clearing. There had to be at least ten. A few were sitting and talking together, and he saw a couple more eating by a pile of fresh kill. He was shocked at how big the pile was. It was full of frogs, mice, birds... More fresh kill than he'd ever seen in his whole life! His stomach rumbled at the sight of it, and he longed to taste some of the prey.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather for a clan meeting!"

Deserve nearly leaped out of his fur at Depthstar's yowl, and he shrank back, pressing close to his siblings. The blueish black tom was standing ontop of the large rock, looking down on the cats below. Crowmask and Bluerain sat on either side of the kits.

"G-guys!" Boost whimpered, and Deserve gasped in disbelief as even *more* cats streamed out of the dens. He pressed close to Boost and Song, his heart racing in his chest as the cats gathered below the rock around them. *I've never seen so many cats in one place!* He thought in terror. If they decided to attack, they were dead meat for sure. Perhaps they'd throw them onto the fresh kill pile! He felt vulnerable and alone. Several cats were looking at the kits, surprised and confused.

"Are those kits?" A young white and cream tom whispered to a darker cream striped she-cat. "What do you suppose they're doing here?"

His companion shook her head, looking puzzled. "I've never seen them before, Milkblaze."

A golden tom with black tufted ear tips narrowed his eyes. "They smell like rogues!"

Beside him, a dark brown and gray tom bristled. "The same ones who killed Pinetail?"

A sleek red tabby she-cat walked by and flicked him on the ear with her tail. "Don't be ridiculous, Cliffshade!" She exclaimed. "Those are only kits!"

"Poppywing's right," A young gray tabby tom added as he stepped to her side, gazing at her fondly. "As always."

The red tabby let out a purr and nuzzled him. "Not as right as you, Rainheart."

Cliffshade snorted and rolled his amber eyes as the two cats rubbed their muzzles together. "Lovebirds."

Deserve huddled against his brother and sister, growing more and more frightened as the cats sat down around him, watching them. *Please don't hurt us!* He shifted in front of Boost and Song to protect them, trembling as his eyes darted from cat to cat. The cats murmured to each other as they watched them.

"I'm scared," Song whimpered, her white fur bristling as she crouched against her brothers.

Deserve looked back at her anxiously. "Don't worry," He whispered shakily. "We'll be okay!" He wish he could believe his own words. He was terrified at being alone, surrounded by these wild cats, without the protection of his mother or father.

"Cats of ShadowClan," Depthstar began from the rock. "I'm sure some of you have noticed the arrival of these three kits." He gestured with his tail toward them, and Deserve tensed as even more cats turned to look at them. He swallowed, trembling under their burning gaze. "Their mother came outside the camp not long ago, seeking food and shelter for her starving kits." He paused. "I have decided to allow them into the clan."

Many cats turned to the kits, sympathy filling their eyes. "Poor

things!" Rosebreeze exclaimed. Milkblaze looked down sadly.

A dark gray and white tom stood. "Is that a good idea?" He questioned. "What if they're from Bone Shred's gang?"

The ShadowClan leader dipped his head. "I have considered that, Ashcloud. But these kits don't carry the scent of twolegplace."

Ashcloud hesitated before dipping his head. Most seemed to agree with Depthstar, while a few exchanged uncertain looks.

"Hasn't ShadowClan let in enough rogues lately?" Cliffshade pointed out, casting a glare across the clearing. "We already have Poisonedsap to worry about!"

Deserve followed the tom's gaze and saw a golden and brown she-cat sitting near the edge of the clearing, her amber eyes narrowed. Beside her, a creamy tabby tom stood, glaring at Cliffshade. "Don't be ridiculous!" He hissed. "Poisonedsap has been with us for two seasons now! She helped feed our clan through the rest of leaf-bare, and she's an excellent hunter. She's proven herself over and over."

Cliffshade narrowed his eyes at the tom. "Don't be so sure of yourself, Maplefur," He snapped. "That cat doesn't belong here!"

Maplefur leaped to his paws, his yellow eyes blazing with anger. "Say that again!"

Deserve tensed, staring at the two toms anxiously. *Are they going to fight?? Will they try to kill one another? These cats are mad!* Poisonedsap watched them, looking amused.

"That's enough!" Depthstar snarled, and the two warriors glanced at him. "Maplefur is right." He moved his gaze to the she-cat. "Poisonedsap has proven her loyalty to us. She is to be respected and trusted just the same as every other clanmate."

Cliffshade lashed his tail, but said nothing. Across the clearing, Poisonedsap dipped her head. "Thank you, Depthstar." She meowed.

Is that how outsiders are treated here? Deserve wondered anxiously as he shivered. *Will cats be suspicious of us too?*

As though he read his thoughts, Depthstar went on. "There is no reason to be suspicious of these newcomers. They're only kits, and pose no threat to our clan." He raked his gaze across his cats. "Would any of you like me to send them away to starve to death?"

He was relieved when no cat objected. *At least these cats aren't cruel enough to let us die!* The clan leader nodded. "Right." He studied the kits. "The kits don't appear to be six moons old yet, and will need to stay in the nursery for a couple moons." He looked toward a leafy den. "Sunflower? Greenpine?"

Deserve saw two she-cats sitting by the den. One was a ginger tabby, the other a brown tabby. Beyond them, three kits were playing in the den.

"Would one of you care for the kits until they are apprenticed?" Depthstar asked, staring at the queens. "Sunflower, I know you already have your paws full with our three."

Sunflower hesitated, looking thoughtful. She looked at Deserve and his siblings sympathetically. "Of course I'll take them in," She murmured.

Beside her, Greenpine nodded. "I can at least help look after them until my kits are born," She decided.

Depthstar dipped his head. "Thank you. They have lost their mother and deserve to be loved and comforted." He looked down at the clan. "Please welcome these kits, and make them feel safe among us." He leaped down from the rock, and the cats dispersed, murmuring to one another.

Deserve and his siblings looked around anxiously. *What now?* Crowmask and Bluerain padded away from them, and he tensed, feeling even more vulnerable. *Wait!* He felt frozen. Boost and Song shifted closer to him.

"Hello."

He jumped as Sunflower padded up to them. He and his siblings stared up at her warily. She looked friendly enough, her yellow eyes

warm and sympathetic as she gazed down at them. "My name is Sunflower," She meowed gently. When the kits shrank back, she added, "Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you. None of us will."

Deserve stared up at her uncertainly. Her expression suddenly filled with sadness. "Oh, you're so thin! Come have some fresh kill." She began padding away, flicking her ginger tail. "You must be starving. Come."

He and his siblings exchanged an uneasy look before following her, looking around nervously as they crossed the busy clearing. *So many cats...! So many strangers!* But when they reached the fresh kill pile, Deserve's anxiety faded, and his stomach yowled at him for food as the mouth watering scent of prey filled his nose.

"Wow..!" Boost whispered. "So much prey!"

Sunflower let out a purr and picked up a mouse by its tail. She turned and dropped it in front of the kits. "Here you go, kits. If you want another, let me know. Take as much as you need."

Though he was nervous, his hunger overthrew all his other senses. He and his siblings immediately crouched around the mouse, digging into it. *Food!* Deserve purred loudly as he gulped down the meat rapidly, his empty stomach growling for more. I've never been so happy to eat something!

Sunflower sat down and purred. "Slow down, it's not going anywhere!"

I can't help it! I'm starving! They continued eating until there was nothing but a skeleton left, and even then they licked the bones clean. Deserve sat up and licked his lips. *I haven't felt so full in days!*

Song let out a happy sigh. "That was delicious!"

"I'm stuffed!" Boost burped. Suddenly, his eyes clouded with sadness. "Mom would have loved this. She was hungry too."

Deserve's content faded into anxiety. *Velvet was starving too! How is she going to feed herself?* A horrible thought filled his mind, making him feel sick. *She's going to die...*

The queen gazed at them sympathetically. "I'm sorry about your mother," She meowed quietly.

Just then, Depthstar padded up to them. Deserve tensed and looked up at the clan leader nervously. "Sunflower, are you sure you can handle six kits?" He asked, looking worried.

The ginger tabby she-cat let out a purr. "Of course I can, Depthstar." She touched noses with him, and Deserve recognized the same affection between them that Dice and Velvet had shared. *They must be mates.*

Depthstar gazed at her warmly. "Don't hesitate to ask Greenpine for help if you need it." He looked down at the kits. "Welcome to ShadowClan." He turned away to speak with a black and red tabby.

Sunflower watched him for a moment, then paused and turned to the kits. "Why don't we go to the nursery?" She suggested.

Song blinked at her. "What's that?"

"It's the den where the queens and kits sleep," Sunflower told them. "It's very cozy. You'll like it, and you'll have my kits to play with."

I don't want to play with any other kits! Deserve thought sadly. *I just want to be with Boost and Song!* The three of them followed her across the clearing to the leafy den he'd seen before. "Come," She purred and ducked into the den.

Deserve hesitated before slowly following her. He looked around the den. It was sheltered by leaves and branches. Two nests of moss had been made here. Greenpine lay in one of them, while by the other one, three tom-kits played together, pouncing and laughing. *It's not the same as the barn...* He thought sadly. *It smells weird, and there are too many cats!*

Greenpine lifted her head and blinked warmly at them as they padded into the nursery. "Hello, kits."

None of them responded, too nervous and upset. Deserve looked at the other kits uneasily. One of them was black, another a brown tabby, and the last was a brown and white tabby. They were busy

play fighting, batting at each other with their paws. *At least we might make some friends... But what are clan kits like?* He wondered.

"Kits!" Sunflower raised her voice to get the attention of her sons, and they paused, abandoning their game and padding over to her. "You'll be having some new denmates."

The black kit tilted his head as he stared at the newcomers. "Who are they?"

"They smell weird!" The tabby and white tom exclaimed, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "Are they rogues?"

"They were," Sunflower told him. "But now they're members of ShadowClan." She turned to Deserve and his siblings. "These are my sons, Snakekit, Brownkit, and Blackkit."

Boost hesitated before speaking. "H-hello."

Deserve felt uncomfortable as the kits eyed them through narrowed eyes. He dropped his gaze. *I don't think they like us...*

"Aren't you going to introduce yourselves?" Sunflower prompted.

"O-oh..." Boost shuffled his paws. "I'm Boost. This is my sister, Song, and our brother, Deserve."

He was startled when the kits broke into laughter. "What weird names!" Blackkit chuckled. "Boost!"

"Don't forget Deserve!" Snakekit added, and they laughed even harder.

While his siblings looked down, Deserve glared at them, his fur bristling with anger. *And I suppose Snakekit, Brownkit, and Blackkit are perfectly normal names!* He was about to say something when Sunflower cut in.

"Kits!" She snapped, and they fell silent. "That's no way to welcome someone! Cats outside of the clans have different names than we do, and you must respect them. Apologize immediately."

All three of them looked reluctant. "Sorry," Brownkit grumbled.

"Sorry..." Blackkit lashed his tail and looked away.

"Yeah..." Snakekit's eyes gleamed with amusement. "Sorry, *Deserve*."

What's wrong with these kits? Deserve thought, frustration burning through his pelt. *Dumb furballs!* He looked away as Sunflower stepped into her nest and laid down.

"Kits?"

They turned to see Bluerain duck through the nursery entrance. He was surprised to see that she was carrying the bundle of hay that Boost had brought along. He completely forgot how he'd dropped it in all the chaos. She lowered her head and rested it on the ground. "I found this outside the camp," She meowed softly. "I think it belongs to you."

"O-oh..." Boost stepped forward and sniffed at the bundle. "Thanks..." He picked it up in his jaws. Beyond him, the other kits looked amused, but Boost didn't seem to care.

Sunflower tilted her head. "What do you have there?"

Boost couldn't respond with his mouth full of hay, so Song did. "It's hay from our nest, in our barn..." Her tail drooped. "Where we stayed with our parents."

The queen's yellow eyes clouded with sympathy. "I see..." It was quiet for a moment. "I promise you'll be safe here," She murmured. "I'll love you as though you were my own."

The kits exchanged a sad look. Deserve knew they were all thinking the same thing. *No one can ever replace our mother. We don't want any other she-cat to love us like that.*

Sunflower looked down at them sadly. "You've had a hard day," She meowed quietly. "You must be exhausted." She flicked her tail toward the nest. "Come get comfortable."

I don't want to be that close to her... She's still a stranger to us. *We*

hardly know her. Deserve and his siblings padded to the edge of the nest near Sunflower's rear. Song curled up into a ball, and Deserve lay against her. The moss was much softer than the hay they were used to sleeping. But despite that, he would give anything to have his old home back. He let out a soft sigh.

Boost laid on the other side of Deserve, slowly dropping his bundle of hay on his paws. He sniffed at it. "It still smells a little like mom..." He murmured. "And home..." He rested his chin on the hay and snuggled against it as he closed his eyes.

Deserve pressed close to his siblings. "We're going to be okay..." He whispered.

Song opened her eyes and glanced sadly at him. "Do you think mom is okay..?"

I hope so... Deserve didn't know what to say. Boost stared at the ground numbly. "W-we'll never see her again... Will we?"

It was quiet for a long moment. *We all know it's true...* They huddled closer together, and Deserve felt his siblings trembling against him. He knew he probably was too. His broken heart sunk in his chest like a stone. He'd never felt so lonely and devastated.

"We still have each other... At least we're together..." He rasped. He rested his chin on Song's neck and wrapped his tail around Boost. They pressed close to them, and he tried to find comfort in the warmth of their bodies against his. *I still have Boost and Song.. They're all I have now.* He closed his eyes. *We only have each other...*

Chapter 11

Deserve padded through the forest, sniffing for prey. He couldn't smell anything, and the trees around him were unfamiliar. However, somehow he knew exactly where he was going, and that a mouse was near. He looked around the shadows and spotted it sitting by the jagged trunk of a pine tree.

Aha! He ran at it, surprised when the mouse didn't move or react to him at all. He trapped it in his claws and bit down into its neck. Blood spurted into his mouth, and he immediately shot back, staring in shock. Blood gushed heavily and unrealistically out of the mouse's throat in a heavy stream.

He watched the blood splash onto the grass, fascinated by it. Though it sickened him, he couldn't look away. The crimson liquid oozed and spread through the grass toward his paws, and he snapped out of his trance, taking a step back before the blood touched his paws. He raised his head and looked around the shadowy forest.

White fur rushed past him, and he froze. "Velvet!" He gasped out.

The cat paused and looked over her shoulder at him. She looked... Different. Her fur was just the same snowy white it had always been. But she was horribly thin, and her face was sunken in, her blue eyes dull and emotionless as she stared at Deserve.

"Mom! You came back!" Deserve let out a cry of joy and started toward her. But to his surprise, she turned away and began racing away through the trees. "No!" He gasped. "Where are you going?" He shot after her. "Come back!"

But Velvet acted as if she didn't hear him. She ran through the trees,

her white tail streaking behind her.

"Mom!" He called out desperately, trying to run faster, but instead he seemed to be moving slower, his paws floating over the air. "Don't leave us! Please!"

He heard a snarl and turned his head to see dark figures slip out of the shadows of the forest, their fangs glinting and eyes glowing red. They were the shadowy cats! The same ones he'd dreamed about attacking the barn!

"No!" He let out a terrified wail and desperately tried to run, but he slowed into a walk instead, unable to control his paws. He looked ahead anxiously. "Mom!" He cried. "Help me!" But his mother had vanished. She was nowhere to be seen.

The shadowy cats began circling around him, drifting like smoke as they grinned and snickered at him. Deserve tried to avoid their fierce red eyes, but he couldn't. He shut his eyes and crouched low to the ground, wailing in terror. *Go away! Leave me alone!* They began closing in on him, their snarls and laughter ringing in his ears until he couldn't take it anymore.

"No!" He screeched.

***

Deserve jerked awake, letting out a gasp. His fur was hot and bristling. He turned his head rapidly, his eyes darting around as he breathed heavily.

Two she-cats were laying asleep in nests close to him, as well as three kits. One, a black kit, raised his head, looking bewildered. "What's wrong with you?" He exclaimed. His brothers stirred.

Where am I? Who are those cats? This isn't home! For a heartbeat, panic bolted through his veins. It took a moment for him to remember the events of yesterday. *I'm in ShadowClan... Velvet left us...*

He let out a sigh and rested his chin on his paws, his fur slowly flattening. He recognized the kits as Blackkit, Brownkit, and

Snakekit, and the queens as Sunflower and Green-something. *Greenflower? Greentree?* He wasn't sure. *These cats have weird names.* It was very early in the morning. The sun hadn't risen yet. Beside him, Boost and Song sat up, looking worried.

"Are you okay?" Song whispered, while Boost stared at him anxiously, still holding his bundle of hay under his paws.

Deserve nodded, dropping his gaze. "I-I just had a nightmare." He heard a snort and looked up to see the other kits padding up to them, looking annoyed. Brownkit had his jaws wide open in a yawn.

"Your stupid *nightmare* woke us up!" Snakekit growled, lashing his striped tail.

He looked down. "Sorry," He muttered.

Brownkit rolled his eyes. "I'm not surprised," He purred to his brother. "Rogues are all inconsiderate, aren't they?"

Song bristled. "That's not true!"

"I bet it is!" Blackkit sneered and stepped closer to them. "You all must have fleas too."

Frustration boiled through Deserve as he narrowed his eyes at the kits, his tail lashing. *Those rude furballs!* He stood up and glared at them. "If anyone has fleas, it's you! A bunch of dumb forest cats!"

The clan kits bristled, and Boost shot him a startled look. "Deserve!"

"What?" He blinked in surprise at his brother. "They can't talk to us like that!" He and his siblings had been through enough. There's no way I'm letting these kits add onto the list!

Snakekit stepped closer to Deserve, his green eyes gleaming. "You should be nicer to us. We'll tell Depthstar what you said, and he'll throw you out."

Song's eyes flickered with unease. "W-what?" She and Boost exchanged a look.

"That's right," The tabby and white kit purred. "You'll have to go back to your pathetic rogue life, and I bet you all starve to death because you can't take care of yourselves."

Deserve bristled. *How dare he??* "I can hunt," He shot back, glaring at the kit.

"Sure you can!" Snakekit broke into laughter. "A little rogue kit hunting all by himself!" The other two joined in, and Deserve narrowed his eyes, frustration pulsing through him. *I bet he can't hunt yet! I'll show them!*

"Kits." Sunflower stirred in her nest and blinked open her eyes, looking drowsy. "It's so early. If you're going to play, why don't you go into the clearing?"

Blackkit looked up at her and let out an innocent purr. "Okay!"

As the queen settled back down into her nest and closed her eyes, the kits padded toward the exit of the nursery. Snakekit looked over his shoulder, his eyes gleaming as he waved his tail. "Come on, rogues," He purred. "Let's play."

Something about the tone of his voice troubled him. Deserve and his siblings hesitated, exchanging uncertain looks. *I don't like this... Those kits are trouble.* Were they leading them into a trap?

"What's wrong?" Blackkit purred. "Are you scared?"

Boost stepped forward and puffed out his chest. "Of course not!" He insisted. Despite the situation, Deserve was glad to see his brother back to his regular self, full of pride and confidence. *But what if it's a mistake?*

"Then come on," Brownkit purred and ran outside. Boost picked up his bundle of hay and ran after him.

Deserve watched his brother follow the clan kits out of the nursery, and Song hurried after him. He let out a sigh. *I guess we're going...* He padded after his siblings.

The clearing was dark and empty. *I guess even clan cats don't like*

getting up early. He looked around. The camp seemed a lot different than when he'd last seen it, frightening and full of strange cats. It was almost relaxing, and the pine trees around him looked beautiful and tall. *Maybe I'll grow to like it here...* He thought for the first time. Maybe me, Boost, and Song can be happy...

They followed Snakekit and his brothers to the side of the clearing. He noticed that the camp was lined with thorn bushes. *We'd better be careful of that!*

"Okay." Snakekit turned to face them and sat down, purring. "What kind of games do rogues like to play?"

Blackkit swished his tail back and forth. "Probably dumb ones." As he and his brothers chuckled, Boost dropped his bundle of hay on the ground.

"Hey, what's that?" Brownkit tilted his striped head.

"Oh." Boost looked down at the bundle and pawed at it. "I-it's hay from our old nest."

The three brothers broke into laughter, and Boost looked away, his tail drooping. Song pressed her side against him to comfort him.

"That's stupid!" Snakekit laughed in amusement. "Why would you want to carry around that piece of dung?"

That little..! Deserve jumped to his brother's defense. "Don't make fun of him!" He snapped. "How would you feel if you lost your parents?"

"We'd never lose our parents," Snakekit retorted, his eyes gleaming. "*Clan cats* don't give up their kits."

Deserve bristled angrily. "Our parents didn't give us up!" He exclaimed.

Brownkit stood, his tail waving. "Oh, yeah? Is that why your mother brought you here?"

"Shut up!" Deserve snarled angrily, his tail lashing madly behind

him. His heart throbbed at the mention of his mother. He wanted nothing more than to be with her again, safe and happy in the barn. We'd be starving, but at least we'd be together.

Boost stepped closer to him. "Ignore him, Deserve," He whispered. "He's trying to-" Suddenly, Snakekit rushed over and snatched Boost's bundle of hay off the ground, racing off with it across the clearing

Boost let out a startled gasp. "Hey!"

Blackkit and Brownkit laughed and raced after their brother, and Boost immediately chased after them. "Stop!" He called anxiously. "Give it back!"

Snakekit laughed and spun, tossing the bundle to Blackkit, who caught it in his jaws and started running toward the warriors den with it.

What are they doing?? Deserve and Song ran after the others. *How dare he take that from him??* "Cut it out!" He yowled angrily as he charged at Blackkit. "This isn't a game!" He'd almost reached him when he spun and tossed it over Deserve's head back to Snakekit.

The tabby and white kit snickered and dropped the bundle of hay in front of the thorn barrier, beginning to claw madly at it.

"No!" Boost gasped desperately as Blackkit and Brownkit joined in, clawing the hay apart until it was scattered in pieces across the ground.

As the kits laughed, Deserve and his siblings stared miserably at the scraps of hay; the one thing they'd had left to remember their old life by. Song let out a whimper while Boost shut his eyes and turned away.

"How could you?" Deserve let out a snarl, his voice cracking. His heart throbbed with sadness, but the rest of his body became tense with fury as he stared at the kits who did this to them. He let out an angry hiss and lunged at Snakekit.

The tabby and white tom hissed as Deserve swiped a paw at him,

but he dodged, and Deserve stumbled forward awkwardly. The next thing he knew, paws slammed into his chest, and he let out a yowl of pain as he was thrust into the thorn barrier.

"Deserve!" Boost and Song gasped in alarm.

He gasped out in pain as thorns pierced his body and the back of his head, his heart racing in panic. He tried to get off the bush, but Snakekit pinned him by his chest, his green eyes gleaming.

"Let go!" Deserve gasped.

"You're hurting him!" Song wailed, and Boost hissed angrily, glaring at the kits.

But Snakekit only growled and glared at him, his tail lashing. "You don't belong here, rogue," He sneered and pushed him harder into the thorns, and Deserve whimpered. "You'll never be a warrior like us, and neither will your stupid brother and sister!"

Just when he thought he couldn't take the pain anymore, Snakekit let go and stepped back. Deserve cried out as he stumbled out of the bush, pain shooting through his back and shoulders with each step. *I must be full of thorns!*

As Song and Boost ran to him, Snakekit and his brothers chuckled.

"He looks like a hedgehog!" Blackkit laughed.

Deserve gritted his teeth as he whimpered in pain. That hurts!

"Are you okay?" Boost gasped. "You're full of thorns!"

Song sniffed at his pelt. "You're bleeding!"

I'm bleeding? Deserve winced as he looked over his shoulder, straining to get a look at his back. He couldn't see the thorns very well against his black fur, but tiny drops of blood trickled through his fur. *I'm bleeding! Have I ever bled before?* He tried to remember, but through his panic, his mind went blank. *We were always safe in the barn... We hardly ever got hurt.* He felt dizzy.

"Kits?" Sunflower stepped out of the nursery, blinking away sleep. "What's-" She broke off and gasped. "Deserve!" She rushed over, and Boost and Song stepped back as she began sniffing at him. "What happened? You're full of thorns!"

He shakily glared at her kits. "It was-"

"We were playing a game, and he fell into the thorns." Snakekit cut in, his eyes wide and anxious.

Liar! Deserve wanted to call him out, but he was in too much pain. And what if he hurt Boost or Song because he told on him?

His siblings looked too worried to bother telling Sunflower the truth. "He's bleeding!" Song whimpered.

"You poor thing!" Sunflower licked Deserve's ear, and he flinched back, startled and mildly disgusted. *You can't lick me! Only Velvet can lick me. She's my mother, not you!*

Blackkit stared at him, his eyes round and innocent. "Will he be okay?"

"Of course he will," Sunflower meowed and gently touched her nose to Deserve's shoulder. "Can you walk?"

Deserve shakily stood, wincing as pain shot through his shoulder blade. *I must have a thorn right there.* "I-I think so..."

"Alright, come on then. We'll go see Hawkfeather." Sunflower padded alongside him slowly, leading him toward the medicine den. When they reached it, he peered inside warily. Two tom-cats were asleep in their nests. One was a brown spotted tabby, the other a very young gray spotted cat.

The queen stepped into the den. "Hawkfeather?" She whispered. "Dewpaw?"

"Hmm?" Hawkfeather stirred in his nest, his yellow eyes opening. He looked startled when he saw Deserve. "That's the new kit, isn't it?" He sat up, shaking bits of moss from his fur. "What's going on?"

"He was playing with the other kits and fell into the thorn barrier," Sunflower explained as Hawkfeather crouched and sniffed him. "He's taken a lot of thorns."

The tom nodded, looking sympathetic. "Poor scrap! Just a moment, I'll fetch you some cobwebs and poppy seeds." He turned and padded to the back of the den.

He passed Dewpaw, and the young gray tom raised his head, blinking away sleep. "What's up?"

"A kit had an accident with some thorns," Hawkfeather meowed as he clawed together some cobwebs. "Nothing too serious." He returned to Deserve and dropped some cobwebs and a tiny leaf wrap in front of him. "He'll be fine."

Sunflower dipped her head. "Thank you, Hawkfeather. I must return to my kits." She looked down at Deserve for a moment before turning and leaving the den.

Deserve grew nervous as he realized he was alone with these two cats he didn't know. What are they going to do?

The tabby tom pawed the leaf wrap open and pushed it toward him. Inside were tiny black seeds. "Eat those," He told him.

Eat them? Why? Are those seeds? Deserve blinked, staring at the tiny things. "Why? What are those?"

"Poppy seeds," Hawkfeather told him. "They'll ease your pain."

How can seeds heal you?? That sounds like nonsense! He tilted his head as he scooped them up in his pad and studied them. "Really? How do you know?"

"Because I'm a medicine cat." Hawkfeather sounded amused.

"A medicine cat?" Deserve blinked at him. "What's that?"

The brown tabby twitched his tail. "I suppose you don't know much about the clans yet. Hold still, I'll tell you while I remove these thorns."

He carefully plucked a thorn out of his back with his teeth, and Deserve gasped out in pain. "Ow!"

"Sorry." Hawkfeather sniffed his thorn-studded pelt. "Every clan has a medicine cat. We know how to heal injuries and treat the sick." He plucked out another thorn, and he yelped, but tried to focus on what the medicine cat was telling him. "We also speak with StarClan."

"StarClan?" Deserve winced in pain, and Hawkfeather dabbed at his back with cobwebs. "Is that one of the other clans?"

The tom shook his head. "StarClan doesn't live in the forest with us. They live among the stars."

Deserve blinked. "Huh?" *Is this cat crazy? How can they live in the stars? Cats don't fly!*

"They are the clan cats who have died," Hawkfeather explained. "They may not be with us, but their spirits live on in the stars. A medicine cat can share dreams with them and learn important information about the safety and future of our clan. StarClan watches over us and guides us."

Dead cats go somewhere...? I thought they were just gone? Deserve stared at the medicine cat, fascinated. *Is Dice in StarClan? Is he watching over us?* "Wow... I guess a medicine cat is a very important part of a clan," He realized. What would they do without one?

"That's right," Hawkfeather purred and stepped back, sitting down. "There you go."

"What?" Deserve looked back and noticed that there were no more thorns in his body. His fur was patched in cobwebs. "You're done already?" *I was so busy listening to him, I didn't notice!*

Hawkfeather purred in amusement. "You're all healed. How are you feeling?"

Deserve stood up. It hurt a little, but nowhere near as much as before. *The poppy seeds really work!* "Much better," He purred. "Thanks!"

"Anytime," Hawkfeather nodded.

"Be more careful next time you play," Dewpaw added from his nest, his yellow eyes warm. "And welcome to ShadowClan."

Deserve let out a purr, feeling a sense of belonging for the first time since he got here. Maybe this won't be so bad. There are some nice cats here. But Snakekit's words echoed through his mind. *"You'll never be a warrior like us, and neither will your stupid brother and sister!"* His heart sunk.

Hawkfeather nodded and paused, looking down at him. "What's your name, kit?"

"Deserve," He replied, distracted as he thought of Snakekit.

"Deserve?" Hawkfeather echoed. "That's a strange name."

He felt a flash of irritation. "It's a unique name," He muttered.

"It certainly is!" Dewpaw twitched his tail. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Of course there isn't. He thought. *I like my name!*

"Deserve?"

He turned to see Boost and Song at the entrance of the den, their eyes wide. "Are you okay?" Song asked anxiously.

Dewpaw purred and stood up in his nest. "Deserve will be just fine."

"Yeah!" Deserve agreed, stepping toward them. "I'm feeling much better, see?"

"You look funny," Boost chuckled, looking at the cobwebs plastered to his fur. Deserve let out a playful growl and crouched, only to wince in pain. *Ow!*

Hawkfeather stepped forward. "You'll have to take it easy for the rest of the day," He warned. "No rough play, alright?"

"Okay," Deserve nodded, and he and his siblings padded out of the den. As they headed into the clearing, he noticed Snakekit, Brownkit, and Blackkit watching them from outside the nursery, their eyes gleaming.

"We should play again tomorrow!" Snakekit called, and they laughed.

Anger and sadness pulsed through Deserve's body. *They can't do this to us!*

Song flattened her ears. "Those kits are so mean!"

"Yeah." Boost stared across the clearing at his destroyed bundle of hay. "What will we do without something to remember our home by?"

Deserve's heart ached with sadness. He licked each of his siblings on the head. "We'll always remember the barn," He meowed quietly. "We don't need hay." He narrowed his eyes at the clan kits. *And those rotten furballs won't lay a claw on us... I won't let them.*

Chapter 12

Deserve sat outside the nursery, looking at the cats in the clearing as the sun set over the camp, casting dark shadows across the ground. Beside him, Boost and Song were sharing a mouse. He felt much better than he had earlier after Snakekit pushed him into the thorns. He felt little to no pain. *Medicine cats sure are useful.*

Cobratail, the clan deputy, was standing by the side of the clearing with several other cats. "Silverblossom, when Crowmask's patrol returns, I'd like you to lead a border patrol."

An older she-cat purred. "Of course. Shall I bring Copperpaw?"

At the mention of his name, the golden brown apprentice raced over, his amber eyes lighting up. "Yes, you shall!"

They chuckled in amusement, and Cobratail nodded. "Of course," He purred and scanned the clearing. "Rosebreeze! Poppywing! You can go as well."

A cream tabby and a red tabby she-cat padded toward the deputy.

"Can I come too?" Rainheart padded after them, looking at Cobratail hopefully.

The black and red tom hesitated. "I think four cats is enough. And I could use you for a hunting patrol later on."

The gray tabby's tail drooped. "But I don't want to be away from Poppywing for one moment!"

Poppywing let out an amused purr and turned to him. "Rainheart, I'm not leaving forever, you know!"

"But I'll miss you." He stared at her sadly.

She let out a purr, her blue eyes softening. "I'll be back," She promised and nuzzled him. "Then we'll have the whole night to

ourselves."

"Okay..." Rainheart gazed at her warmly. "I love you."

Poppywing licked his ear. "I love you more."

"Not as much as I love you!"

"I love-"

"Ew!" Copperpaw looked disgusted, his tail swishing back and forth. "For StarClan's sake, we get it!"

The warriors chuckled in amusement, and Silverblossom covered her apprentice's eyes with her paw, laughing. "You'll understand when you're older."

By the elder's den, an older tom snorted. "Those two are going to have a ton of kits in the nursery by morning if they keep that up!"

"Buzzardglare!" A ginger she-cat shoved him playfully. "We were young like that too once."

Clan life is so... Different. Deserve thought as he watched the cats in the clearing. *It's not like life in the barn, where it was quiet and peaceful... Here, it's busy and organized.* He remembered how he'd imagined forest cats before; as evil shadowy cats with glowing red eyes. Savages and murderers. *It's not like that.* However, his thoughts darkened as he thought of Snakekit, Blackkit, and Brownkit. *Some of them though...*

He saw movement by the camp entrance and turned his head to see what it was. Crowmask's hunting patrol had returned. The black warrior was holding a frog in his jaws. He was followed by Bloomfire and Maplefur, who each had two mice, and Poisonedsap, who was holding an impressively large thrush. Silverblossom dipped her head to them before leading her patrol out of camp.

Wow! What a catch! Deserve thought as he stared at the dead bird. *She must be a great hunter!*

"Wow!" Even Cobratail seemed to be impressed by it. "That's a great

catch."

Poisonedsap dipped her head and deposited the bird on the fresh kill pile. "It's nothing."

"Nothing?" Maplefur exclaimed. "She climbed straight up a pine tree and got it! You should have seen her." He gazed at her proudly. "She's the best hunter I've ever seen."

The golden she-cat let out a purr, looking at him with gleaming eyes. "You're too kind."

"Bloomfire!" A young golden tabby ran over to them. "How did it go?"

The orange and white she-cat purred. "It was great! I caught two mice." She nudged one toward him. "You can have one, Flamepaw."

He hesitated and shook his head. "You caught it, it's yours." He looked down. "I can't wait until we're warriors together. I miss training with you."

Bloomfire let out a purr. "I miss you too. But you're only a moon younger than me! Depthstar is bound to have your assessment any day now."

Flamepaw looked at her anxiously. "I hope so! I really want to fall asleep in the warriors den with you-" He broke off, looking embarrassed.

She purred and licked his ear. "Me too." They purred and touched noses.

Clan cats sure like romance. Deserve thought, his fur prickling with disgust. *I can't imagine what's so great about it.* He heard snarling by the fresh kill pile and snapped his attention to it.

"So what, she caught a bird!" Cliffshade was growling, his fur bristling as he faced Maplefur and Poisonedsap. The cream tabby was standing protectively in front of her, his eyes narrowed. "That doesn't mean we can trust her!"

Maplefur's tail lashed behind him. "How can you say that?" He hissed. "She's hunting for our elders, queens, and kits! What more do you need?"

"That cat is not a warrior!" Cliffshade growled. "She's a rogue, she always will be!"

Deserve flinched. The words were eerily similar to the ones Snakekit had spoken to him this morning. He felt a pang of sympathy for Poisonedsap and looked at her. The dark golden she-cat had her gaze fixed on the ground. *I know how she feels...*

"Cliffshade!" Cobratail stepped between the two warriors, glaring back and forth at them. "Enough. Poisonedsap is a warrior of ShadowClan. She's earned her place here, and does not deserve this treatment. Is that understood?"

The dark brown and gray warrior narrowed his eyes and turned away sharply without saying a word. Poisonedsap looked down. Maplefur shifted closer to her and said something quietly before licking her ear. She bristled, looking startled and glaring at him. But she slowly relaxed and let out a purr.

"Cliffshade is right about that fleabag."

Oh no. Deserve narrowed his eyes and turned to see Snakekit and his brothers pad over to them, glaring over at Poisonedsap. Boost and Song raised their heads from the half eaten mouse, looking uneasy.

"Yeah! She's a rogue," Blackkit growled. "A good for nothing rogue!"

Song glared at the tom-kit. "What do you have against rogues anyway?" She demanded. "What did they ever do to you?"

"What did they ever do to us?" Snakekit echoed, his eyes narrowed. "Right, you don't know." He straightened and curled his tail over his paws. "Let me tell you a story about your crooked kind."

Deserve and his siblings exchanged a look before they turned to listen to the kit. Great, what nonsense will this be?

Snakekit cleared his throat. "Not long ago, these vicious, blood-thirsty rogues came to the forest. They wanted to take all of it for themselves!"

"Yeah!" Blackkit jumped in. "And they were led by this great big black cat, who wore a fox skull on his head! He was the most evil cat ever!"

"Shut up, I'm telling it!" Snakekit shoved him aside before looking back to Deserve. "At least, that's what the warriors say. We never saw him. We were hardly a moon old at the time."

"But we remember what it was like." Brownkit's gaze was on the ground. He looked genuinely uneasy. "So many cats died."

Snakekit nodded. "Yeah. One night, we were all asleep in our nest with Sunflower. The rogues attacked, jumping out of the shadows!" He stood up on his hind legs, raising his white paws in the air. "They were hungry for blood, and showed no mercy! There was hissing, snarling, yowls of agony!"

"It's one of our earliest memories," Brownkit meowed.

"They killed Stormstar *twice!"* Blackkit added. "He was our leader then. Two of his lives, gone! And our deputy, Pinetail!"

"That's why Cliffshade hates Poisonedsap so much," Brownkit growled. "Pinetail was his mother."

Snakekit glared at his brothers as he dropped back down on all fours. *"As I was saying,* they killed *so* many cats!" Suddenly, his expression grew distant. "Sunflower pushed us into our nests and told us to stay while she joined the fight. There was blood everywhere, and we were afraid we were going to die."

They stared at him, shocked. Deserve was shaken by this image. A horrifying scene of blood and death, terror and fury. Yet something about it excited him... He couldn't explain it. Perhaps it was the thought of the exhilaration of battle? Yes, that had to be it.

"That's terrible!" Song whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah..." Snakekit blinked and glared at her, the hatred returning to his eyes. "We're never going to let that happen again," He growled. "We're going to protect ourselves, and our clan, from cats like *you!"*

Deserve's eyes widened. "You think *we're* like that?"

"We'd never kill anyone!" Boost exclaimed. "We're not like those rogues at all!"

But the kits continued to eye them coldly. "You can never be sure, can you?" Snakekit growled.

A yowl rang out from the nursery behind him, and all six kits spun, looking alarmed. *What's going on?? An attack??* Deserve immediately thought back to Snakekit's story. *Is it the rogues??*

"Was that Greenpine?" Brownkit exclaimed. "Is she hurt?"

Just then, Sunflower rushed out of the nursery and past them toward the medicine den. She was halfway there, but Hawkfeather was already rushing out to meet her. "Greenpine's kitting?" He gasped. The queen nodded, and they both hurried back toward the nursery. "Dewpaw!"

The light gray spotted apprentice hurried after his mentor, his yellow eyes wide as he followed him into the nursery.

Sunflower sat down with the kits, who looked at her anxiously. "What's going on?" Snakekit asked.

"Is something wrong with Greenpine?" Blackkit blinked.

The ginger tabby shook her head. "No, no," She purred. "Her kits are arriving."

"Arriving?" Deserve echoed, tilting his head. "From where?" Velvet had never talked to him about this. He suddenly wondered how he and his siblings had come into existence. *Did we just appear?*

Blackkit snorted at him. "What a stupid question!" He paused and looked up at his mother. "Err, where do they come from?"

Sunflower's yellow eyes shone with amusement. "You'll find out when you're older."

They sat there for some time. Yowls continued to sound from inside the nursery, and Deserve flattened his ears, turning away. *How long is this going to take? I don't want to listen to this!* He looked beside him. Boost and Song looked bored. Snakekit noticed him looking in his direction and glared at him, his eyes narrowing.

Deserve looked away and turned to the clearing. It was a bit more empty now. Cobratail was sitting by the meeting rock with his thick black and red tail curled over his paws. Milkblaze was demonstrating a battle move for Timberpaw. Rainheart, Bloomfire, and Flamepaw were gathered together, talking quietly and laughing.

By the edge of the clearing, Poisonedsap was sitting in the shadow of a pine tree, her amber eyes narrowed as she watched the other cats. *She looks lonely...* He hesitated, looking back at his siblings for a moment before getting up and padding toward her.

He felt nervous as he neared the golden and brown she-cat and joined her in the shadows. He wasn't sure why. *Maybe it's Snakekit's story... Or maybe it's the fact that I don't know her... But she seems a lot like me...* "H-hello," His voice came out as a squeak, and he flinched, embarrassed. *Mouse dung!*

Poisonedsap's dark amber gaze flicked down at him. "What do you want, scrap?" She demanded.

He forced himself to meet her cold gaze. "Is the cream tabby cat your only friend?" He asked quietly.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "All my friends are dead," She grunted.

"O-oh..." Deserve dropped his gaze and shuffled his paws awkwardly. "I'm sorry... You must be lonely." When she didn't respond, he went on. "Why is everyone so mean to you just because you were a rogue?"

Poisonedsap glared at him. "What does it matter?" She growled, her tail swishing back and forth. "Don't you have a ball of moss to chase?"

Deserve stared up at her, believing that her cold attitude was due to the pain she felt inside. "I was a rogue too."

She eyed him closely. "Hmm... So you're one of the scraps Depthstar took in yesterday?"

Deserve nodded and shuffled his paws. "The other kits bully us, just like they do to you." He stared at her. "You're the only cat who knows what it's like... You're like me."

She watched him silently, her tail lashing. "So I am."

"What do we do?" He asked anxiously. "There has to be a way to earn their trust! Won't they accept us?"

Poisonedsap leaned down until her muzzle was close to Deserve's. "You want to know the cold, hard truth, kit?" She growled. He stared into her dark amber eyes uneasily. "We will *never* be accepted. Clan cats are cruel and heartless. They killed my brother."

Deserve's eyes widened. "T-they did?" He whispered. *I didn't think clan cats were so bad! But maybe Dice was right! Maybe they are murderers!*

"Yes," Poisonedsnap growled, her dark eyes locked on his. "As long as you weren't born here, you will always be treated like an outcast." She stood and eyed him for a moment longer. "Get used to it."

She padded away, her ragged tail dragging along the ground. Deserve stared after her silently. *Is she right...? Will I always be treated like an outcast?*

"Help! We need help!"

Deserve snapped his attention to the thorn tunnel and gasped. Silverblossom's patrol was returning. Copperpaw had been the one to yowl, his eyes wide with distress. He had blood trickling from a

cut above his eye and a wound in his shoulder. Poppywing and Rosebreeze followed, carrying Silverblossom between them.

The silver she-cat's condition startled him. She had a horrible wound stretching across her belly, her fur soaked in blood. *What happened to them??*

As the warriors gently lowered her to the ground, Cobratail and several others raced over, fur bristling in panic. "What happened?" The deputy gasped. "Fetch Hawkfeather!"

Copperpaw trembled as he stared down at his mentor anxiously. "W-we-we-" He seemed to shocked to speak, and Cobratail looked at Poppywing urgently.

"We ran into a badger," The red tabby explained, limping on one paw. "It came out of nowhere. We-"

"Poppywing!"

Rainheart charged at her and thrust his head against her shoulder, his fur bristling as he covered her with licks. "Are you okay?" He gasped. "You're hurt!"

"It's nothing, I'm fine!" Poppywing promised and rested her head on his, trembling. "It's okay."

"Oh, Poppywing!" Rainheart nuzzled her. "Thank StarClan you're okay! I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you!"

Cats began crowding around Silverblossom, gasping and crying out in alarm. The silver she-cat lay on her side, her flanks heaving as she bled onto the ground. Cobratail stood over her, pressing his paws to her wound. "Where's Hawkfeather?" He hissed.

"He's helping Greenpine kit!" Sunflower gasped. She had joined the group surrounding the wounded she-cat, her eyes wide. "Should I get him?"

"Yes!" Cobratail snapped.

But Silverblossom moaned and shook her head. "T-the kits are more

important..." She croaked. "I-it's too late anyway... StarClan... is calling..."

Diamondpaw let out a wail and crouched, pressing her muzzle into her mother's fur. "Silverblossom..!"

"Silverblossom!" Dewpaw shot out of the nursery, his yellow eyes lit with horror. Hawkfeather yowled at him to come back, but he ignored his mentor and pushed through the crowd. "Get out of the way!" He crouched beside his mother, staring at her anxiously. "Hold on!" He gasped. "I'll save you!" His fur bristled and he looked around wildly. "I-I'll fetch some cobwebs and marigold, hold on, I'll-"

"Dewpaw..." Silverblossom gazed at her son with exhausted, numb blue eyes. "It's my time..."

The apprentice stared down at her as though unable to process what she had said. "N-no...!" He choked. "I'm a medicine cat! I'm supposed to save you!"

"There's a lot that a medicine cat can do..." She murmured and rested her paw over his. "But you cannot change the path StarClan has laid out for us."

Dewpaw stared at her for a long moment, then let out a sob and pressed his nose into her fur. "Don't leave me..." He begged.

"We already lost Stormstar," Diamondpaw added in a cry. "W-we can't..." She swallowed, unable to speak.

"Me and your father will always watch over you," Silverblossom murmured. "I promise." She let out a shaky purr as her kits cuddled against her. "D-Dewpaw, you will be a fine medicine cat... And Diamondpaw, a great warrior. I'm so proud of you both..." She let out a soft sigh and shuddered before she stopped breathing. Dewpaw and Diamondpaw let out wails of grief.

Deserve stared at them in silence, his heart aching for them. He'd never seen a cat die before. Dice's death had been instant. *I'm glad he didn't have to suffer... But Dewpaw and Diamondpaw are lucky they*

got to say goodbye to her... His heart sunk. *We never got a chance to say goodbye to Dice when he was alive, or Velvet...*

***

It was very quiet for the rest of the evening. It was night now. Stars shone in the sky. The clan gathered in the clearing, circled around Silverblossom's body with their heads low. Deserve was sitting with his siblings outside the nursery, watching quietly.

"Silverblossom was a great warrior," Depthstar was meowing solemnly from the meeting rock. "She was brave, wise, and skilled. She served her clan well for many many moons and fought many battles."

Dewpaw and Diamondpaw were crouched beside their mother, their chins rested on her body. Hawkfeather had his tail rested across his apprentice's shoulders to comfort him.

"May you find good hunting in StarClan," Depthstar said quietly. As the clan began to talk about the dead warrior, Deserve turned away and padded into the nursery. *This is sad...* Boost and Song followed him.

Inside, Greenpine was asleep in her nest, exhausted from kitting. Huddled against her belly were her three newborn kits: Stripedkit, Mottledkit, and Foxkit.

"I can't believe how tiny they are," Boost meowed, clearly trying to change the subject.

Song nodded and let out a dry purr. "I like his colors," She pointed to Stripedkit with her tail. "Don't you?"

Deserve nodded quietly, distracted by his thoughts. The recent death had reminded him of his father, and the loss of his mother. *I miss them...* He closed his eyes and curled up into his nest. *Life in ShadowClan seems hard... Poisonedsap is right. Being a rogue means I'll never be accepted. I don't belong here. I belong in our barn...*

Chapter 13

Deserve awoke to a paw prodding his side. He stirred against his siblings in his nest and blinked open his eyes, looking up drowsily. Snakekit, Brownkit, and Blackkit were standing over them, their eyes gleaming in the shadows as they looked down at them. They had already woken Boost and Song. The sun hadn't risen yet. He grew hot with irritation. *What do they want?*

"Good morning, rogues," Snakekit purred.

He let out a sigh. "What do you want?" He growled. He tried to sound brave, but his stomach was twisting with anxiety.

"We want to play again." Blackkit's yellow eyes glittered. "I'm sure there's some game we can come up with."

"How about we play 'leave us alone and let us sleep'?" Boost muttered, resting his chin in the moss.

Brownkit snorted and flicked him on the nose with his tail, and he jerked back. "Sleep is for the weak!" The kit sneered. "Come on."

Song flattened her ears nervously. "I want to stay here."

Snakekit narrowed his eyes and growled, unsheathing his claws. Deserve's fur bristled in alarm. *Are they going to attack us?* He felt his own claws slide out. *If they lay a claw on Boost or Song...* The kits stepped closer to them, growling as they lashed their tails. His heartbeat quickened in panic, and he thought quickly. *They can't do anything when their mother is around!* He backed up into the sleeping queen's belly and lightly kicked her with his hind paw. *Please wake up!*

"Hmm?" Sunflower stirred and raised her head, blinking open her eyes. *Yes!* Snakekit and his siblings looked startled and quickly stepped back, sitting down and looking up at her innocently. Boost let out a sigh of relief, and Song shifted closer to Deserve.

"Good morning," Blackkit let out a purr, his eyes bright.

Sunflower let out a yawn. "Good morning, kits." She stretched out and looked down at them. "Are you alright?"

"We're fine," Snakekit cast a glance at Deserve. "Aren't we?"

Deserve held back a growl. "We sure are."

"Good," The ginger she-cat purred. "Are you all hungry? Why don't we go to the fresh kill pile?" She stood up and turned toward the exit of the den.

Boost perked up. "Okay! I'm starving!" He and Song hurried after her, and Blackkit and Brownkit followed.

Thank goodness! That could have been bad. Deserve followed more slowly. They wanted to hurt us. They would have if I hadn't woken up Sunflower.

Snakekit padded beside him, and Deserve tensed nervously. He kept his eyes ahead of him as they walked, trying to avoid the kit's gaze. *Just don't look at him or talk to him...*

But the kit leaned close, his eyes narrowed. "You got lucky this time," He growled in his ear. "But next time, you won't be." He gave Deserve a shove, and he stumbled, quickly regaining his balance before he fell over.

He watched coldly as Snakekit rushed ahead of him to Sunflower and the other kits. *Or maybe* you're *the one who won't be so lucky next time...*

***

Later that day, Deserve and his siblings were playing in the nursery. The sun was high in the sky now, and it was very warm. Sunflower had given them a ball of moss to play with. It wasn't the same as playing in the barn, but it wasn't so bad. And it was the first time they'd felt carefree since Dice's death.

"I've got it!" Song purred and swat the ball of moss toward Boost.

The tabby kit leaped up and batted it back to her, his eyes shining.

Deserve watched from the side of the den, letting out a small purr. I'm glad they're having fun. They deserve to be happy. He had played with them for a little while, but anxiety about Snakekit had distracted him, making him too stressed to let go of his worries and play. The three kits were sitting on the opposite side of the den, their eyes coldly fixed on Boost and Song as they played. Sunflower watched them, purring.

If Sunflower wasn't here, they'd hurt us... Deserve thought, his mind darkening as he watched the clan kits. I won't let that happen. *As long as we stay close to Sunflower, we'll be okay.*

At the back of the den, Greenpine lay in her nest, lapping at her three kits' fur. She paused and looked at Sunflower, letting out an amused purr. "You sure have got your paws full, don't you?"

Sunflower purred back. "Six kits are a lot to handle, but they're good kits."

Good kits? Yeah right! Deserve narrowed his eyes. *Your kits are a bunch of cold hearted rats!*

A shadow cast over him, and he quickly looked over his shoulder, startled. Depthstar had padded into the den, his sleek dark blue-black fur shining in the sunlight. Sunflower purred a greeting to her mate, and he stepped forward to touch noses with her.

"Depthstar!" Snakekit and his siblings ran to their father eagerly.

The clan leader purred and crouched as they leaped around him. "How are my kits today?"

"Great!" Brownkit purred, looking up at him eagerly. "What's going on with the clan? Are you getting ready for any battles?"

"Can you make us apprentices?" Blackkit asked hopefully. "Please!"

Depthstar chuckled, his blue eyes gleaming. "You're not six moons old yet!"

The black kit's tail drooped. "Aww! But you're the clan leader!"

"And we're your kits!" Snakekit added. "Can't you break the rules for us?"

The clan leader purred in amusement. "No. I'm sorry, but you must wait your turn like any other kit." He licked Brownkit on the head. "You'll be apprentices before you know it."

Snakekit puffed out his white chest. "I'm going to be the best apprentice ever!" He declared.

"Can you tell us who our mentors will be?" Brownkit asked eagerly.

Depthstar purred. "I'm still deciding. I promise I'll choose the best cats for the job." He sat beside Sunflower.

The queen sighed as she gazed at her kits. "They grow up so fast."

Depthstar cast her an amused look. "They're still kits," He reminded her.

"Not for much longer," Sunflower murmured as they watched their kits begin to playfight.

A cat poked his head into the den. It was Cobratail. "Depthstar?" He dipped his head. "I need to speak with you."

"Of course," The tom stood and looked down at his sons. "I need to go. Be good, alright?"

The kits purred and watched Depthstar leave. Snakekit looked over his shoulder toward the exit of the den as he padded up to Deserve, his thin tail high in the air. He turned to him, his eyes gleaming. "Our father is the clan leader," He sneered. "Yours is just a rogue."

Deserve bristled, his stomach churning with anger. "Shut up!" He snarled. "Our father was great, and the best hunter ever! Don't talk about him, you dumb furball!" Snakekit looked taken back, his eyes lighting with anger.

"Deserve!"

He flinched at Sunflower's voice and looked at her nervously. She was narrowing her eyes at him. "Don't talk to your denmate like that!" She exclaimed. "Apologize to him."

I didn't do anything wrong! Deserve flattened his ears. "But-"

"Now!" She snapped. Boost and Song had abandoned their game, staring at him anxiously.

Deserve's heart felt heavy in his chest, frustration burning through him. He glared at Snakekit, hardly able to force the words out. "Sorry," He grunted.

"Apology accepted." Snakekit looked at him smugly, and Deserve gritted his teeth, lashing his tail. *I could rip your stupid face apart right now!*

Sunflower nodded approvingly. "Good." He twitched her tail. "Why don't you all go play nicely outside?"

"Okay." Snakekit and his brothers padded out of the den. Blackkit looked over his shoulder at Deserve and snickered.

Deserve glared at him, his eyes narrowed to slits as fury burned through him. *Those stupid little-*

"Deserve?" Song stared at him. "Are you okay?"

He glared at her, unable to speak as fury and sadness lumped up his throat. His fur was bristling.

Boost nudged him. "Don't let them get to you," He murmured. "It's not worth it."

Deserve drew in a deep breath and growled. "I hate them." The words felt strange. He'd never hated anyone before. But these kits drew out an anger in him that he'd never felt before. "They think they're better than us? I'm going to show them that they're not." He got up and padded out of the den, his tail lashing. Boost and Song followed more slowly. "Snakekit!" He called sharply.

The kits turned to him, looking amused. "What's the matter? Are

you mad?" Snakekit purred.

Deserve went right up to him and thrust his muzzle in his face. "I can hunt!" He hissed. "Can you say that much?"

Snakekit leaned back, his whiskers twitching in amusement. "I don't believe you."

As Deserve growled, Song jumped in. "He can!" She insisted. "He's a great hunter, just like our father!"

His sister's praise made Deserve feel a bit better. But his tail kept lashing as he held Snakekit's gaze coldly. The clan kits exchanged a look. Then Snakekit let out a purr. "Alright then." His eyes narrowed. "Prove it. We'll sneak into the forest, and you can catch me a mouse."

"I will!" Deserve growled, his tail swishing back and forth. "But it won't be for you."

Snakekit chuckled and turned away, flicking his tail. "Come on. There's a secret way out in the bushes over here." He looked around to make sure no cat was watching, then slunk to the side of the clearing.

The five kits followed him and slipped through a small gap in the bushes. Deserve felt a rush of determination. *Wait until that mouse-brain sees what I can do... Then we'll see who's laughing!* He could taunt him for moons to come about how he couldn't hunt, just like he and his brothers had about them being rogues. The thought made him purr with satisfaction.

He looked around as they padded into the forest. Pine trees surrounded him, stretching tall into the sky. The ground was patched with grass and blanketed in fallen pine needles. "Alright." Snakekit turned to face them and sat down, smirking at Deserve. "Go catch a mouse."

"Gladly." Deserve glared at Snakekit as he passed him. *I'll show you!* After a moment of anger, he forced his fur to lie flat. *I won't be able to hunt properly if I'm like this. Focus!* He stepped forward, the

irritation slowly fading from his mind as he breathed in the air. He scanned the area, his eyes flicking to every bush, root, and stone he saw in search of the tiny creature.

"What's he doing?" Blackkit exclaimed impatiently.

"Shh!" Song glared at him.

Come on... There has to be one around here somewhere! Deserve thought anxiously, suddenly afraid that he wouldn't find one. *Imagine what Snakekit would say! And I need to do this for Boost and Song!* He took a few steps forward and sniffed at the ground. *Come on...* His ears pricked forward when he picked up the scent of mouse, and a heartbeat later, he heard the tiny squeak. He looked aside and spotted the little brown creature sitting by the gnarled roots of a pine tree, sniffing along the ground.

Yes! Deserve narrowed his eyes. *You're mine...* He dropped into a crouch, quickly remembering everything Dice had shown him. *Tail above the ground...* He lifted his tail away from the earth. *Watch out for twigs...* He eyed the pine needles below his paws. *They shouldn't be too noisy...* He slowly began to stalk toward the mouse, focusing his eyes on it until he hardly saw anything but his target. He imagined his father beside him, praising him and urging him to go on. The thought inspired him. *This is for you too, dad...*

He watched the tiny creature as it cleaned its whiskers. *Okay... I'm close enough...* He took a deep breath and leaped at it. The mouse looked up sharply and turned to flee. *No!* Deserve slammed his paw down on its tail, and it squeaked, falling over onto its side and struggling. He felt amused as he watched it twisting in panic. *You're mine now!* He lunged down and bit into its neck. The mouse let out a squeak, and he released it, watching in satisfaction as it went limp.

Yes! He picked up the dead mouse and proudly trotted back to the other kits, his tail in the air. He dropped the mouse at Snakekit's paws and sat down, looking at him smugly. "Told you I could hunt."

Snakekit stared at the mouse wide eyed, clearly shocked. His brothers exchanged a bewildered look. "How'd he do that?"

Brownkit whispered.

"Good catch!" Boost purred, and Song lifted her tail in the air, looking at her brother proudly.

Deserve lifted his chin in the air, pride and satisfaction blazing through him at the reaction of the clan kits. I showed them! Maybe things will change now! They can't pick on me when they know I can do something they can't!

But after a few moments, Snakekit's shock faded, and he let out a snort. "So you can hunt!" He lashed his tail, the mischief returning to his eyes. "I bet you can't fight."

Boost and Song exchanged an uneasy look. "Err... No." He admitted.

Great! They've moved on to something else. Deserve narrowed his eyes. "Fighting won't fill your belly," He pointed out.

"No, but it could save your life if some *rogues* attack," Snakekit growled, glaring at him. After a moment, he turned to Boost and Song. "How about we... teach you how to fight?" A purr rumbled in his throat.

What was that in his tone? Deserve narrowed his eyes, watching the kit as he padded up to his siblings. *I don't like this...* He stepped toward them.

Boost hesitated. "I'd like to learn, but... Maybe not yet..." He looked nervous as he eyed the tabby kit.

"Why?" Snakekit sneered. "Are you scared?"

Boost bristled and glared at him. "I'm not scared of anything!"

"Good." Snakekit crouched, his eyes gleaming. "Then here's your first lesson!" He leaped at Boost, who let out a startled squeak as he was bowled over. The clan kit laughed and unsheathed his claws, swinging them at his face.

Deserve stiffened in horror as his brother cried out, droplets of blood flying onto the ground. "No! Get away from him!" He yowled.

"Boost!" Song cried and ran toward her brother, but before she could reach him, Brownkit lunged at her and knocked her aside, swiping his claws at her stomach.

His heart exploded with panic. "Hey!" He started toward her, but Blackkit crashed into him and pinned him onto his back, swiping at his face.

"Take that, rogue!" The black kit sneered. "Get out of here!"

"Go back to your stupid barn!" Snakekit laughed as he bit into Boost's ear, and he wailed in pain, trying to pull free from his teeth.

Song shoved Brownkit aside and charged at her brother. "Cut it out!" She leaped at Snakekit and tried to pin him, but he pushed her over and swiped his claws at her ear. Beyond them, Brownkit had pounced on Boost, digging his claws into him.

No! Deserve stared at his siblings, frozen and horrified. *Don't you dare hurt them!* Claws raked across his ear, and he snapped out of his trance, glaring up at Blackkit. "Get off!" He used his hind paws to kick into his belly, and the kit gasped out and rolled away.

He scrambled to his paws, shaking pine needles from his fur as he stared at the scene. Boost's ear was bleeding, and he had several cuts in his body, his eyes lit with fear. Song was trying to push Snakekit off of her, wailing as he swiped at her, tiny droplets of blood staining her white fur.

Seeing his brother and sister in pain and such distress lit a cold fire inside of him. His heart felt heavy in his chest, drumming madly as he locked his eyes on Snakekit. He was laughing, his eyes gleaming as he clawed at Song. Deserve suddenly remembered something Dice had told them long ago. *"I would never let anything hurt my family. I would fight with tooth and claw to protect you." And that's what I'm going to do... Dad would never let this happen!*

Hot anger pulsed through him, and he let out a yowl of fury, launching himself at Snakekit, unsheathing his claws. "Get away from my sister!" He spat. The tabby and white kit looked startled as Deserve crashed into him, throwing him off of Song and pinning

him to the ground.

"Oof!" Snakekit gasped, glaring up at Deserve furiously. "Get off me, flea-bitten rogue!" He bit into Deserve's paw, and he yowled out, pulling away. Snakekit took advantage of the moment and pushed up into him, slamming him onto his back. "You don't belong here," He sneered, his eyes glittering with amusement and anger.

Deserve breathed hard as he glared up into the sneering face of his tormentor. A panicky feeling shot through his body, his head was pulsing with anger, his throat dry. All of these feelings spread through him until he felt nothing but hatred. With a furious screech, he thrust his front paws into Snakekit's chest, and the kit went stumbling backwards, looking startled by his strength.

In that moment, he became unaware of anything happening around him. His ears muted the sounds of the forest until all he could hear was the fury pulsing inside his head, the high pitched ringing in his ears. He felt light headed, almost in a trance. His veins felt icy with rage, his body driven not by his mind, but by the hatred and grief filling his heart. These feelings burned through him, controlling him as he thrust Snakekit onto his back, pinning him to the ground and digging his claws deep into his shoulders. He very faintly heard the kit cry out in pain below the ringing.

Time seemed to stand still. Deserve felt no hesitation, no remorse or fear. The anger was in control of him now, blinding him, driving his body.

He caught a glimpse of Snakekit's alarmed face as he lunged down, clamping his jaws around his throat. Snakekit let out a panicked yowl and started struggling, but Deserve was hardly aware as he fastened his teeth deep into his throat, tasting blood and feeling the crushing of muscle.

"Get off!" Snakekit choked out in a screech, struggling frantically and batting his paws at Deserve's shoulders, but Deserve held him down. "Off!" G-" His voice became a gurgled cry, and Deserve felt blood gush into his mouth as he crunched down harder, snarling loudly.

"Deserve!" He faintly heard Song yowl. "Stop!"

"What are you doing?" Blackkit screeched.

Their words broke through his trance, and he snapped back into reality, releasing Snakekit's throat. He staggered backwards off of him, breathing heavily as he stared down at his opponent. *I showed him! I showed that fox-heart!*

He expected Snakekit to get up and fight him again. But he lay there, trembling and choking up blood onto the ground. Deserve breathed heavily, the anger slowly fading away as his gaze drifted to his throat. His heart skipped a beat. Snakekit's throat was torn open in a horrible, ragged wound, blood soaking through his fur. After a moment, he shuddered and went still, his eyes wide and sightless.

I used the killing bite... Deserve realized, his body stiffening with panic as he stared at him. *I... I knew it would defeat him... But... Not like that...* He felt his muzzle wet with blood.

"Snakekit!" Blackkit cried out and ran to his brother's body, sniffing at him anxiously. "He's dead!" Brownkit shot to his side, huddling against him.

Deserve tensed and waited for Blackkit and Brownkit to attack them and avenge their brother. But they didn't. Both kits looked stunned. Brownkit shakily looked up at Deserve, his eyes lit with terror.

They're afraid of me! Deserve shakily looked aside at his siblings, his legs shaking under him. His breath caught in his throat. Boost and Song were staring at him with the same look on their faces, their eyes wide with horror.

Deserve trembled. *They have to understand! I didn't mean to, I was trying to protect us..!* He took a step forward, stumbling a little. "G-guys..." He choked out. "I-"

Before he could reach them, Song stumbled backwards, letting out a whimper. "You're a monster!"

Her words pierced his heart like thorns. He stopped and stared at

her, numb with shock. "Song..." He rasped.

Beside her, Boost shivered, staring at him in horror. "How could you kill a cat?" He whispered.

Deserve trembled, his body numb with shock and heartache. My own brother and sister are afraid of me..! He let out a whimper and crouched low to the ground, wishing he could wake up from this nightmare. "Please, I didn't mean to-"

Before he could finish, Brownkit let out a wail and turned away from Snakekit's body, racing back toward the camp. "Sunflower!" He cried loudly.

No! Deserve's heart exploded with panic. *No, no, no!* His heart leaped into his throat. *I killed a ShadowClan cat! They'll be furious! They'll kill me! Kill me!* His mind yowled at him to run, but he was frozen to the ground. *You have to go! Run! Run! H*e forced himself to move, and he staggered backwards. *Go!* His mind screeched.

He shot one last pleading look at Boost and Song before he spun and fled the scene, stumbling over the forest floor. He heard Song yowl at him to come back, but he ignored her, picking up speed and running onward. He continued and until he was a good distance away on a slope and stumbled against a pine tree, panting heavily. He heard a loud wail of grief behind him, and alarm shot through him. Sunflower had seen Snakekit.

Go! Keep running! Deserve breathed heavily and forced himself onward, his body stricken with terror as he ran blindly through the forest, trees flashing past him. He had no idea where he was going. Just that he needed to keep running, as far as he could. *I can't let them catch me! Are they chasing me?* He wasn't going to stop to find out. When he reached the edge of the forest, he stumbled to a halt, breathing hard and staring ahead with a rush of joy.

The barn!

He was in front of the thunderpath. He fought away the memory of his father's death and stared across into the field where the barn stood, just where it had always been. *There it is! My home! The place*

where I belong! His heart ached with longing. *Velvet must be there! She'll be so happy to see me!* He started forward, wanting nothing more than to snuggle against his mother's soft white fur.

But a thought crossed his mind, and he stopped by the edge of the thunderpath. *If I go back, what's Velvet going to say? What would she do if she found out what I did? I abandoned Boost and Song, and killed another kit... Why would she take me in? She would hate me and send me away!* His heart ached, and his tail drooped.

That isn't my home anymore... He stared out at the barn longingly, remembering all the fun and happy times he'd had there with his family. *My family... Dice is dead... Velvet left us... Boost and Song are afraid of me...* He swallowed a lump in his throat, tasting Snakekit's blood. He'd give anything to have it all back. But now,it was gone forever.

His gaze rested on the patch of dirt by the barn where his father was buried. *I was just trying to protect us...* He thought with a whimper. *You would have done the same, wouldn't you? Would you be proud of me, or ashamed? Would you hate me? Do you hate me?* He remembered what Hawkfeather had told him about StarClan, but shook it away. *StarClan! A bunch of mouse-dung made up by the clans!*

The clans... He slowly turned away from the barn and began walking along the side of the thunderpath, staring down at his paws. *The clans are evil, terrible cats... They sent my mother away to starve to death... They bullied us... They hate other cats just because they weren't born in the forest...*

The dark thoughts continued to fill his head as he continued along the thunderpath. Thunder suddenly crackled in the sky, and rain began pouring down from the clouds. Deserve whimpered in fear, wishing he had his parents to comfort him, like they had when they were sleeping in the barn together. He was already soaked. He let out a tiny cry and broke into a run, searching desperately for cover. He spotted a hollow log by the edge of the forest and hurried over, crawling inside.

He trembled and shook rain from his fur, shivering. *It's so cold!* He peered out at the rain as it pattered heavily at the earth. His white

paws were muddy and dirty. *I wish Boost and Song were here!* He let out a sob and curled up into a ball, tucking his tail over his nose. He'd never felt so alone. *I've lost everything..! My home... my family... Everything...* He felt numb with heartache. After a long while, he felt the pain ease into a fury. His tail started lashing as he thought about the clan cats again.

They did this... Everything that happened to me is because of them... He shut his eyes tight, his chest feeling heavy as hatred and frustration pulsed through him. *Snakekit deserved to die... Just like the rest of them! One day, I'll make them pay...* He silently vowed. *I'll make them sorry for ever tearing my family apart!*

Chapter 14

It was dark. The stars had begun to fade away in the early morning sky. The birds were just waking up, beginning to break the silence with their cheerful chirping. A morning dove swooped down onto the forest floor, softly cooing as it walked along the grass. A peaceful and beautiful creature.

He sprang out of the shadows and slammed his white paws down on the bird, sinking his teeth into its neck. The dove let out a cry of alarm, twitching in his claws before it went limp, and the morning was silent once again.

He raised his head and looked down at the dead dove, his emerald green eyes glittering in the darkness. *I deserved that catch.* He thought, mildly amused at his pun regarding his name. He licked blood from his muzzle and crouched over the bird, sinking his teeth into it and ripping off a clump of feathers. *Time for breakfast.*

Several seasons had passed since the day he'd killed Snakekit and ran away from ShadowClan territory. He had spent this time wandering the forests alone beyond clan territory, and hunting for himself, all while remembering everything that had happened to him in ShadowClan. It had hurt him for quite some time. But the more he thought about Sunflower's kits and how Depthstar forced Velvet to leave them, the more the pain faded away into anger. He let these thoughts poison his mind, the hatred building up inside him, consuming him until he felt nothing but hunger for vengeance.

As hardly more than a kit, Deserve had been too afraid to go anywhere near ShadowClan territory. He had been certain that he would be killed on sight. But he was older now, nearly the age of a warrior. He was no longer a frightened kit. In his travels, he'd encountered many hostile cats that he'd needed to fight with for food and shelter, and these meetings had turned him into a

formidable fighter. He felt confident that he could take on a clan cat. But unlike the rogues he encountered, he wasn't going to let a clan cat live to tell the tale. He hadn't killed any cat since Snakekit. Other cats were simply trying to live their lives in peace. They didn't incite hate toward anyone. But the clan cats? They were cruel, unwelcoming creatures. They deserved to die.

He swallowed the last bit of meat from his dove and sat up, licking his lips. He stared out into the distance and narrowed his eyes at the pine trees up ahead. *I'm nearly at the ShadowClan border.* He pushed the remains of the dove aside and slowly padded forward, his tail twitching slowly. *Let's see if anyone's awake...*

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He'd stayed crouched in the bushes just outside the border of ShadowClan territory for a long while, waiting impatiently. The faintest light of dawn shone in the distance. *Come out, fleabags!* He let out an annoyed growl. *Where are you all?* He suddenly heard faint meowing in the distance and picked up the disgusting scent of clan cats. He crouched deeper into the bushes and narrowed his eyes. *There you are...*

A small patrol of three ShadowClan cats were padding through the forest on the other side of the border, still fairly far away. He recognized Crowmask at the head of the group. He looked closer and tensed when he realized there was another cat he knew.

Sunflower. The ginger tabby she-cat was padding near a small black and ginger tom, her tail twitching as she looked around for prey. A growl rumbled in Deserve's throat as he watched her, digging his claws into the earth. *You... The mother of those rotten kits who hurt me and my siblings...* He suddenly wondered where Boost and Song were right now. *Are they in the camp? Are they happy? Or were they driven out after Snakekit's body was found?* These questions only fazed him for a moment before anger pushed them away, and he focused once more on the clan cats. *Justice at last will be served...*

"Come on." Crowmask was meowing, looking over his shoulder at the others. "We need to check the border first and renew the scent markers."

Good... Deserve thought, satisfaction flooding through his tense muscles. Come to me... He studied the group. Taking on three cats on his wasn't going to be an easy task. But he wasn't going to let this opportunity get away. *Sunflower can't be that strong... The other tom looks like an apprentice, hardly a threat.*

He watched from behind the leaves as they reached the border, hardly daring to move. They were just fox lengths away from him, but hadn't detected him. *The only cat who might give me trouble is Crowmask.* The black tom squat by a tree and began to renew the scent marker. *But if I catch him off guard...*

Deserve let out a snarl and leaped out of the bushes, claws outstretched. He slammed into Crowmask, who let out a startled yowl as he was knocked to the ground. Deserve leaped away from him, his heart racing with excitement. *Yes! It's time! It's time to make you pay!* He spun and lunged for Sunflower, catching a brief glimpse of the stunned looks on the apprentice's face.

"What in StarClan's name-" The ginger tabby gasped and thrust her hind paws into his stomach. He let out a startled snarl as he was thrown off her, stumbling backwards. The apprentice looked frozen in terror. Deserve bared his teeth. Coward! He was about to lunge at him when paws slammed into his shoulder, and he yowled as Crowmask pinned him to the ground, his amber eyes blazing with anger.

"Filthy rogue!" Crowmask spat and swiped his claws at his ear. "Get off our territory!"

Filthy rogue? The insult sent fury pulsing through him. *I've had enough of that from those kits!* He jerked his head forward and clamped his jaws around the warrior's foreleg, sinking his teeth into him. Crowmask let out a snarl of pain and jerked back, releasing him, and Deserve took the opportunity to attack him again, slashing his claws at his flank. He thrust the tom to the ground and snarled, digging his teeth into his shoulder. He tasted blood on his tongue and bit into Crowmask harder until he let out a hiss of pain, struggling to push him off. "Foxpaw, get help! There might be more of them!" He snarled. "Now!"

The black and ginger apprentice stared at Deserve anxiously. "But-"

"Now!" Crowmask yowled and twisted, grabbing Deserve by his scruff and throwing him aside.

He rolled to his paws and panted, his tail lashing madly as he glared at the warrior. *Good! Give me more to fight!* He felt energized, ready to take on the whole of ShadowClan if he had to. His heart sprinted in his chest. He imagined every warrior dead at his paws, and the thought sent joy rushing through him. *They all must die!*

Crowmask hissed and limped on one leg before collapsing, blood streaking his fur. Deserve started forward to finish off the black tom, his eyes locked on his throat. *You'll be my first victim.*

"Wait... It's *you!"*

He paused and swung his head to Sunflower. The ginger tabby she-cat was staring at him, her eyes lit with shock. "It's Deserve! It's him!" Her voice cracked, and she looked frozen. Suddenly, her expression faded into fury, her pelt bristling as she locked her angry yellow eyes on him. "You killed my son!" She screeched and lunged at him.

Deserve quickly reared on his hind legs to meet the she-cat. She pinned him to the ground, hissing furiously, and he was startled at her strength. She slashed at his face, and he let out a screech as blood blotted his vision momentarily. He pushed her off of him and tried to slash at her throat, but she shot back just in time, and his claws raked harmlessly through her fur.

"What did I ever do to you?" Sunflower hissed, circling him. "How could you kill Snakekit?" Her voice cracked with either pain and fury. "I took you in as my own! I cared for you!"

He snarled and lunged at her, slamming his paws into her chest and throwing her to the ground. "And I'm grateful," He growled as she gasped out in pain and struggled to push him off, but he dug his claws deep into her shoulders. "It's nothing personal." Her yellow eyes blazed with anger as she stared up at him.

Deserve's heart raced, his head pulsing with fury as he bared his teeth at her. "Your kits mocked us for losing our mother!" He snarled, his body trembling with fury and hatred. "Now they're going to know how it feels!"

He lunged down, and Sunflower let out a startled screech, batting her paws madly at his body, but he was hardly aware, numb with anger as he crunched down on her throat, blood gushing into his mouth. She weakened under him and choked out a gurgled cry before going limp, her paws slowly falling to the ground. Deserve released her and panted, stepping back as blood trickled down his chin. He looked down at the body in satisfaction. Blood ran from Sunflower's throat, her eyes glazed and sightless. *Wait until Blackkit and Brownkit see that!*

"Sunflower!" Crowmask snarled behind him, and he turned to see the tom staggering toward him, his eyes lit with fury. "What have you done?"

A growl rumbled in his throat, and he started toward him. "You're next!"

"Crowmask! Sunflower! I'm coming!"

He tensed at Foxpaw's growl and turned to see the apprentice racing toward them, followed by three or four warriors. *Fox dung!* He glared at Crowmask. "Consider yourself lucky!" He hissed before racing away.

He charged across the border and through the trees, pausing to look back when he felt he was far enough. No cat was giving chase. They were too busy grieving over Sunflower. He let out a purr of satisfaction and continued running until he reached the edge of the forest, pausing at the edge of the thunderpath.

He sat down and began licking blood from his claws, his body still surging with energy from the fight. Thunder crackled in the distance, and he looked up at the sky as ran began to fall onto his fur. *That feels good.* He thought, closing his eyes. *Vengeance feels good... And wait until I kill even more of those horrible clan cats!*

But I got lucky that there were only three of them. He thought. *Next time, I might not be able to attack. I'll be heavily outnumbered.* The thought irritated him. He dug his claws into the wet ground. *They won't always be out on their own. And I can't fight a whole clan!*

He paused thoughtfully. *A whole clan... What if* I *had a whole clan?* He remembered how Crowmask had yowled, *"There might be more of them!". What if there* had *been more of them? The whole patrol could have been killed. A group of cats fighting at my command...* The thought pleased him.

"But they wouldn't be a *clan*," He growled out loud, spitting the word "clan". *No. They'd be something far greater, with a name more worthy than anything the pathetic clans have come up with. They'd be...*

Thunder suddenly crackled sharply in the sky, even louder than it had been before, and lightning flashed above him. He bristled, glaring around. *That was close! It must have struck a tree or something. I wonder where-*

He broke out of this thoughts when he saw it. Across the thunderpath in the distance, there it was. The barn where he'd spent his kithood with his family, up in flames. Deserve glanced around and crossed the thunderpath, finding himself slowly padding toward his old home.

He kept his eyes fixed on it as he continued walking through the field toward it, his paws muddy and wet. When he felt he was as close as he could get while keeping a safe distance, he sat down, wrapping his tail around his paws as he stared at the smoldering barn. Fire flickered inside from between the cracks of the wood, lapping and eating away at the old structure. He could hear wooden beams crackling and falling from inside. The barn seemed to groan as the wood began to give away, and the roof collapsed, thuds and smashing sounds ringing out from inside the barn. Flames stretched up through the hole in the roof. He saw the flames spreading through the grass in the opposite direction of him, scorching the earth over Dice's grave.

Deserve should have felt something, watching his old home being burnt down. Their old nest, the posts where they would count and

play hide and seek, all of it being consumed in flames. But he felt no emotions. He watched calmly as the fire crackled, sparks drifting through the air and reflecting in his cold eyes.

I will make them pay for what the clans did to us. He thought as he stared into the fire. *It begins here. The clans will pay.* With that, he slowly stood and turned away, leaving behind the burning remains of his old life. *They will pay...*

THE END

The Original Deserve's Beginning

Below is the original Deserve's Beginning, written in 2011.

[image]

[image]

Prologue

It was a cold winter night. Heaps of snow piled up around a barn. Inside, a white she-cat lay in the straw, sides heaving.

"You can do it!" insisted the black and white tom standing over her.

"I don't know, Dice." Panted the she-cat. "This is so hard!" Suddenly she let out a thin wail, panting harder then before.

"That's it, Velvet!" Dice meowed, sounding a little panicked. "They're coming!"

Velvet wailed, and a tiny brown fur ball tumbled out.

Dice quickly began lapping at the kits wet fur, bringing his son to life. "It's a tom." Dice announced to his mate.

"Really?" Velvets green eyes brightened, but seconds later she yowled again. The next kit, a white one, slid out.

Dice began to lick this one, as he had done with the last. "She-cat."

He meowed between licks as Velvet began to push out a last kit. A jet black shape emerged in the straw. After licking him, Dice nudged him towards the other kits and noticed its tiny white paws. "He's a tom." Purred Dice.

"Is it over?" rasped Velvet. When Dice nodded a reply, She lifted her snowy head and gazed at her kits lovingly. "What should we name them?" Velvet weakly asked, looking exhausted. The kits began to suckle.

"Theres plenty of time for that later." Purred Dice. "Sleep now, my love."

A few days later, the snow had begun to melt, and small signs of spring began. Dice was padding into the barn, a sandy colored fresh caught mouse in his jaws.

Velvet lifted her head as her mate appeared. "Is that a mouse?" she purred. "Thanks Dice, I'm starving!"

It had been three days since Velvet had kitted. Dice had been working hard to catch prey for her, because Velvet did not know how to hunt. Together Dice and her had named the kits. Velvet had suggested Song for the she-cat, after the singing birds in the morning. Dice had named the tabby tom Boost, after his dead brother. But one kit remained. As Dice dropped the mouse at Velvets paws, The unnamed Kit lifted his tiny black head. He began to stumble towards it, his white paws awkwardly wobbling. He sniffed the mouse curiously.

"Would you look at that." Murmered Dice.

"I think he thinks he deserves that mouse, Dice." Purred Velvet.

Dice purred. "Sorry little one, your too young to eat mice." Suddenly Dice looked up thoughtfully. "Deserve..."

Velvet looked up. "Deserve? It's a strange name."

"It's a unique name." Corrected Dice.

Velvet sighed happily, watching as the black kit began to suckle her

milk. "Then Deserve it is."

[image]

Chapter 1

"Catch this, Song!" Yowled Boost, batting a ball of moss at his sister.

The white kit reared on her front legs and kicked the ball back at Boost.

His littermates yowling had woken Deserve. The jet black kit groaned and covered his ears with his white paws. "Could you guys be any louder?"

"Could you be any lazier?" Retorted Boost as he caught Songs throw. "You sleep longer then rabbits in the winter!"

"Dad says playing makes you strong!" Added Song, throwing the ball back to Boost.

"Dad also says you shouldn't be waking at the break of dawn!" a new voice growled from the barn enterence.. it was Dice, their father. "Don't make fun of your brother just because he wakes at a decent time."

Deserve sat up, eyes gleaming as Boost missed Songs throw. "Dad!" he squeaked. "I-I..."

But Dice purred. "I want healthy kits that play and sleep. Promise tomorrow you'll sleep like Deserve?"

Boost bluntly nodded. "Kay." Song muttered.

Deserve purred, blinking his emerald eyes. He loved it when Dice told off Boost and Song."

"Now." Meowed Dice. "I think your ready to try this." He reached behind him and pulled out a plump mouse.

Deserves eyes lit up. Yes! He thought. He had been dying to try mouse someday.

He turned and saw his own exitement reflected in Boost and Songs eyes.

"Yay!" Exclaimed Boost, rushing towards the mouse.

But Dice lifted his paw to block his way. "Now, Why not let Deserve try first?"

Boost opened his jaws to protest but sighed. "Fine."

Deserve eagerly padded towards the mouse. He hesitated, Glancing at Dice. His father nodded. From the corner of his eye, Deserve saw Boost's paw tapping impatiently on the ground. Song looked more respectful, but her lashing tail showed she was eager.

Deserve took a deep breath and sunk his teeth into the mouse. Its warm, tasty flesh entered his mouth. He chewed it carefuly, his tiny teeth not used to this. He swallowed and licked his lips.

Boost growled. "Well?"

"Its delicious!" purred Deserve.

Boost and Song shot questioning glances at Dice. Dice nodded, and the two kits dashed at the mouse for their share.

"Is that my kits trying mouse?" Velvet purred, padding towards them.

"Yes!" Mewed Deserve proudly. "Its delicious!"

"Mhm!" Came Boosts reply as he dug into the mouse.

Song purred. "I love it!"

Velvet padded to Dice and sat beside him, leaning her head on his shoulder. " They are growing so fast." She purred. "Are they really five monthes?"

Dice purred. "Yes. They grow like weeds."

Deserve purred happily.

Chapter 2

It was near sunset. Dappled sunlight beamed through the barn roof.

"One...Two..." Boost counted, covering his eyes with his paws.

Deserve peered from inside a hay pile. They were having a game of hide and seek. While Dice went hunting, Velvet was playing too! Deserve could see Songs white tail from behind a shovel. He looked up and saw Velvet sitting on a barn loft.

"9...10!" Finished Boost. "Ready or not, here I come!"

Deserve backed farther into the hay.

Boost peered around the barn. He padded around and caught sight of Song's tail. Boost snickered and snuck towards it. Then he pounced on Songs tail.

"Mrow!" Cried Song, jumping from behind the shovel. "That hurt!"

Suddenly Velvet jumped down from her hiding spot and landed behind Boost. "Boo."

Boost yowled, spinning around. "Hey!"

Velvet laughed and began lapping at his fur.

"Hey, what, stop!" Urged Boost as Velvet lapped at him.

Song was laughing hard.

Deserve joined her, emerging from the hay.

"Ill always love you three!" Purred Velvet, stopping licking Boost. Boost shook his furr out while Velvet leaped towards Song.

"It's the licky monster!" Cried Song ,darting away.

As Velvet turned to Deserve, he ran off with Song.

Velvet began to chase then around playfully. After a while, she caught Deserve and lapped at him.

"Uh!" Groaned Deserve, trying to escape her tongue.

Dice suddenly entered the barn. "What's going on?" He purred. "I think its bedtime now."

Chapter 3

It was night now. Deserve woke, opening his eyes. Crickets sang. Beside him Boost and Song slept soundly. Song was curled up beside them. Deserve looked towards where Dice would sleep. But his father wasn't there. Deserve blinked in confusion and looked around. He got out of the straw and padded towards the barn entrance. He peered around. "Dad?" He whispered. He padded around the barn corner and suddenly saw him. Dice was crouched low to the ground, slowly creeping forward. Deserve watched. What's he doing? He wondered. Dice suddenly leaped into the air and landed on something. Deserve pricked his ears as Dice lifted his head, a mouse in his jaws. Deserve, Excitedly dashed towards him. "That was incredible!"

Dice spun around, fur fluffed up. He relaxed when he saw his kit. "Deserve! You scared me. What's wrong?" He asked.

Deserve shrugged. "Nothing. I couldn't Sleep so I wanted to find you."

Dice padded away to drop his mouse on a pile of prey. "Well you found me. Shouldn't you be in bed?"

Deserve eyed the prey pile. "Shouldn't you be in bed?" He asked.

Dice narrowed his eyes and sighed. "I go to bed after midnight."

"But you need your sleep too!" insisted Deserve.

Dice shook his head. "No. I need to hunt and provide for you."

Deserve blinked. He had never understood why Dice was always hunting. "Why Don't Velvet hunt for herself? Then you would only have to feed me, Boost and Song."

Dice looked a bit angry for a heartbeat, and Deserve wondered if he

had offended him. But Dice relaxed. "Because Velvet doesn't know how to hunt." He meowed quietly.

"Why don't you teach her?" Asked Deserve in confusion.

Dice sighed. "She didn't want to learn. She doesn't like to kill, not even prey."

Deserve blinked thoughtfully. He had never known this. "Then why not teach me?" He asked. "We could hunt together!"

Dice hesitated. "Well..."

"Please!" Begged Deserve.

"Oh, Alright." Purred Dice. "Copy my moves." He crouched low to the ground.

Deserve looked at his body and tried to copy it, pressing close to the ground.

"Good!" Meowed Dice. "Now slowly creep forward." He began to creep forward few steps.

Deserve carefully did the same.

"Then pounce!" Meowed Dice, jumping into the air and landing on a blade of grass.

Deserve pounced a bit further then him and landed on another blade of grass.

"You're a natural." Purred Dice. "Want to try for real?"

Deserve nodded.

Dice stood still for a few seconds. A tiny squeaking came from the distance. It was a brown mouse, nibbling on a seed. Dice nodded to it.

Deserve looked at it and carefully pad forward, as low as he could. He eyed the mouse. Once he was inches away, Deserve leaped and

landed on it, clasping it in his paws. But the mouse struggled in his grip.

"Now to-" before Dice could finish, Deserve lunged his teeth into its neck. The tiny creature stopped wriggling and went limp.

"Deserve!" Dice exclaimed.

Deserve turned to his father, his lips covered in blood.

"You learned the killing bite by yourself!" Exclaimed Dice, clearly impressed.

Deserves heart glowed with pride. "I just figured it would work..."

Dice licked his head warmly. "Tomorrow me and you can hunt together, alright?"

Deserve excitedly purred. "Yes, that would be great!"

"Now, you should go to bed. Take your mouse into the barn, in the morning you can give it to Velvet." Meowed Dice.

Deserve nodded. "Ok." He picked up his mouse and trotted away. "Good night." He mumbled.

"Good Night." Purred Dice.

Deserve entered the barn and put his mouse in a corner. He then stepped back into the straw and curled up. He was very happy. Nothing could possibly break he and his family apart. Right?

Chapter 4

Deserve awoke, this time not to his brothers yowling. He turned his head to the barn entrance. It was morning. Deserve saw Boost and Song slowly waking.

Song opened her jaws and yawned. "Good morning Deserve." She mumbled to him.

"Hey Song." Greeted Deserve. Boost began to awake.

"Morning already?" Moaned Boost.

Suddenly Velvet appeared beside them. "Good morning my kits." She purred.

Deserve purred. "Good morning." He suddenly remembered him catching the mouse last night. "Oh, I have a surprise for you!" He meowed, getting up and dashing to the corner. He picked up the mouse and braught it to Velvet. "Look!" He meowed proudly as he dropped it. "I caught it last night!"

Velvets eyes widened. "Really?' She looked like she didn't quite believe him.

"What!?" Gasped Boost. "Yeah Right!"

Deserves tail lashed in frustration. "But it's true! Dice taught me, he was there!"

"Alright." Velvet purred. "I believe you." He looked at the mouse's neck. "You did catch it. That's not Dice's bite. Great job." She purred, beginning to eat the mouse.

Deserve stood proudly. He suddenly remembered. "Dice was going to hunt with me today!" He dashed out of the barn. "Come watch!' he called.

Velvet purred. "Alright, I'd love to see you in action."

Song and Boost followed. "My bet's he don't catch anything." Muttered Boost.

Ignoring Boosts insult, Deserve glanced around. "Dad?" He called. He spotted his father crouched In the grass. Deserves eyes widened as he saw what he was stalking. A turkey! It was delicious and big enough to feed them all. "Look!" Deserve hissed excitedly to Velvet and his littermates. Velvet stared at Dice eagerly. "Come on..." He murmured.

Dice was stalking towards it when the turkey fled towards the road. Across the road was clanner territory! Velvet had told Deserve stories of the mangy clanners who lived there. If they caught Dice

inside, they would rip him to shreds! Suddenly Velvet gasped. "Oh no..."

Following her gaze, Deserve stared in fear. Dice was going to follow the turkey! He heard Dice snarl. "No you don't!" Dice chased it, heading into the road. But he didn't see the speeding car thundering towards him.

Beside him Velvet gasped. "Dice! Come back!"

But it was too late. Deserve shut his eyes, heart thumping loudly. He heard the screech of the car, then a loud howl of pain and terror. Deserve shut his eyes tighter, panic echoing through him.

"Dice!" came the shriek of Velvets voice. "No!"

Deserve slowly opened his eyes and let out a cry at what he saw. The car was speeding away, leaving behind the limp, bleeding body of Dice.

Chapter 5

Deserve stared at Dice in horror. "No!" He yowled. Beside him Velvet raced at the body.

"Dice!" She whimpered, grabbing his scruff and dragging him out of the road.

Deserve looked behind him. Boost's eyes were wide with horror. Song looked badly shocked.

When Velvet had reached them with Dice's body. Deserve could see tire marks on his side, leading to his head. Dice had blood pouring out of his neck. He was dead. But Velvet licked his head and poked him, trying to wake him. "Dice?" She whispered. "No, Please..."

Deserve felt a lump in his throat. But managed to get out. "He's Gone Mom."

"No!" Wailed Velvet. "He... He cant..." She groaned painfully and turned to the kits. "Go inside the barn and rest." She rasped.

For once Boost didn't object. Deserve turned with his littermates and went into the barn. Song wailed. "He cant be dead!" she burst into tears.

Boost looked heart broken, not saying a word.

Deserve felt like wailing his heart out too. But he had to be strong for his family's sake. He padded towards Song and rubbed his head against hers. "It'll be ok." He meowed dryly.

"Dad is dead!" Wailed Song. "How can it be ok?"

Deserve wasn't sure how to answer that. Suddenly Velvet padded into the barn. Deserve and his littermates looked up.

Velvet took a deep breath and sighed. Her claws were muddy and dirty, which showed she had buried Dice.

"Kits." She meowed. "I need to tell you what's going to happen."

Deserve looked up uneasily.

Velvet dryly mewed. "You know those Clanners I told you about?"

Deserve's eyes widened. Where was she getting at? He nodded.

Velvet mewed. "Well... Some of them are nice. And I... I cant let you stay here anymore."

Deserve's heart skipped a beat. "What!?" He exclaimed.

Behind him Song wailed. "What do you mean?"

Velvet gulped and meowed. "I cant hunt... I cant keep you alive. Im going to bring you to Shadowclan where you can live."

Deserve was shocked. "But, But I know how to hunt!" He exclaimed. "Dice taught me before he died, I could hunt for us!"

Velvet firmly shook her head. "No, your just a kit, I wont put that kind of pressure on you."

Suddenly Boost jumped up behind him. "So you're just dumping

us?" He growled. He was clearly outraged.

Velvet mewed. "No, I'm bringing you somewhere safe." She turned towards the barn entrance. "Come on."

Deserve exchanged shocked glances at his littermates. Boost looked outraged. Song just looked plain terrified, her blue eyes round as moons. They slowly followed their mother. As they pad towards the forest, Deserve turned his head to his fathers grave of fresh dirt. "Goodbye Dad." He whispered, then turned back to the forest.

Chapter 6

Soon Deserve and his family had reached Shadowclan territory. Pine trees loomed over them. Deserve uneasily glanced around. Were some of the clanners hiding behind the tree's, just waiting to pounce on them? Soon they reached a spot where the scent was strong.

"This is the camp." Mewed Velvet dryly. She licked her kits heads one by one. "I love you, good luck."

Deserve sputtered. "Wait, what-"

Before he could finish, Velvet lifted her head and let out a loud yowl, then turned and ran off.

"No, Mom!" Cried Song, almost collapsing in terror. Boost watched her run in fury.

Deserve stared after her.

Suddenly a sound rustled from behind them. The kits spun around to see a large ginger tom looking at them.

Deserves eyes widened. It was a clanner! He saw Boost trying to look strong, but he was shaking like jello.

[image]

Song looked petrified.

The ginger tom meowed softly. "Kits? Where did you come from?"

Deserve quivered and stammered. "W-we're just barn cats...." He managed to get out. "Our mother just left us..." he looked up in horror. Would he shred them?

The tom had a look of pity in his eyes. He turned his head and called a name. "Emberstar?"

Deserve thought wildly. Star... Star... Yes! Velvet had always told them the clanner leaders had star in their name. "He's calling the leader!" He hissed to Song and Boost.

Suddenly a gray tom joined the other.

It must be Emberstar. Thought Deserve.

Emberstar looked down on them and turned to the ginger cat. "Sunpelt, Who are these kits?"

The ginger tom, clearly called Sunpelt, hissed something in his ear, and Emberstar nodded.

Emberstar softly meowed. "Come into our camp kits."

Deserve looked at Song and Boost. They looked frightened, But followed, ears flat.

Deserve looked around at his surroundings as he entered the camp. Clanners were everywhere! He could see some talking together, some sleeping. He saw many dens under bushes and between rocks.

Emberstar lead them to a den and padded in.

Deserve followed, Boost and Song at his heels. Inside he saw a ginger tabby she-cat laying in some moss. Beside her were three kits, a brown and white one, a black one, and a brown one. The she-cat looked up.

"Emberstar?" she meowed. "Where did these kits come from?"

Emberstar meowed quietly to her. "Abandoned rogues."

The she-cat nodded sadly and turned to them. "Welcome to Shadowclan kits." She motioned them over.

Deserve blinked. She seemed nice. Deserve slowly pad over to her with Boost and Song.

"So what are your names?" She asked softly. "Im Sunflower."

"I-im Deserve." Rasped Deserve. He turned to Boost and Song. "Those are my brother and sister, Boost and Song."

"Deserve?" Repeated Sunflower. "That's a strange name."

Deserve slightly growled. "It's a unique name." He copied the words Dice had always said.

Sunflower nodded. "Yes it is." She turned to the other three kits. "Kits, I'd like you to meet Deserve, Song and Boost."

The three kits stopped playing and glanced at the kits. "Who are you?" Growled the brown and white one.

Sunflower scolded him with a flick on the ear. "That's not a nice welcome, Snakekit. And clearly I just told you who they were."

The black kit growled. "They smell like rogues."

Boost flinched furiously. "We are." He shot back.

Sunflower growled. "Blackkit, be nice. They have been through a lot."

The brown kit snorted. "Yeah, I bet."

Sunflower growled again. "Barkkit, please. Go easy on them." He turned to Deserve and his littermates. "Here, theres a nest for you in the corner. You should sleep."

Deserve padded over and curled up close with Boost and Song.

But the three kits padded towards them. "Yeah." Growled Snakekit. "We'll go easy on you alright." He growled sarcasticly. He then

turned away.

Deserve sighed and closed his eyes. We were supposed to stay together. He cried to himself. I thought we could never be split apart. He drifted off into darkness.

Chapter 7

Deserve awoke with Boost and Song to paws prodding their sides. Deserve growled and looked up to see Snakekit , Barkkit and Blackkit.

"Good morning rogues." Purred Snakekit.

Deserve got to his paws and growled. "What do you want? Its early."

Sunflower was still asleep.

Snakekit shrugged. "Yeah. But we thought we could... teach you to fight." He meowed.

Deserve narrowed his eyes. What was that in his tone?

Boost eagerly meowed. "I'd Love to!"

Blackkit meowed. "Ok, do you want to go first?"

Boost nodded. "Sure!"

Suddenly Snakekit jumped at Boost, pinning him. "Stupid rogue!" he sneered, slashing his claws across his face.

[image]

Deserve and Song stared in shock.

"Boost!" cried Song, running towards her brother.

But before she could reach him, Blackkit knocked her away with his shoulder.

Boost had claw marks across his face, blood spilling out.

But Snakekit didn't stop, and continued to score marks down him.

Deserve found himself attacked by Barkkit. Deserve gasped in shock as the kit swiped a paw at his chest.

But suddenly Sunflower woke up. As she lifted her head, Snakekit leaped off of Boost and sat patiently.

Brownkit did the same. But Blackkit hissed in Boost's ear. "Thorn."

Sunflower gasped as she saw Boost. "Boost, what happened?" she exclaimed.

Boost meowed. "It was Snak-" Before he finished, Snakekit slid out his claws in warning.

Boost sighed. "it was a thorn."

Sunflower sighed. "We'd better have Depthstar look at this. Thorns are a hazard for kits!"

Snakekit hissed in Boost's ear. "Hope your ready for more 'training' tomorrow." He snickered.

Deserve sighed. How bad could life get right now?

Chapter 8

Deserve woke up to yowling. It was morning. He looked up to see Barkkit attacking Song, slicing at her.

Boost was fighting Blackit, and clearly loosing.

But Snakekit just sat there, watching with a grin.

Deserve got to his paws furiously. He had had enough. He darted at Snakekit and pinned him.

Snakekit, clearly surprised by his weight, struggled under him. "Get off me, flea bitten rogue!" He spat.

Deserve suddenly realized he knew no fighting moves. So he used the only one he knew. He snarled and sunk his teeth into his neck.

Snakekit let out a howl of pain and terror, then went limp. Suddenly Barkkit, Song, Boost and Blackkit stopped fighting and stared in horror at Deserve.

Deserve looked at them, his lips and fangs covered in blood. He had used the killing bite.

"You killed him!" Cried Barkkit in terror.

Blackkit gasped, staring at him.

Deserve flinched, waiting for them to attack him... But they didn't! they were afraid of him! He turned to look at Boost and Song. They shared the same expression.

Deserve gulped and slowly pad towards them. "G-guys... I..."

But before he could reach them, Song cried and backed away. "Get away from me, you monster!"

Boost shivered and whispered. "How could you kill a cat?"

Deserve stared in heartbreak. His own littermates were afraid of him! He whimpered. "I didn't mean to... I mean..."

Before he could finish, Barkkit wailed. "Sunflower!"

Deserve froze. If the clanners knew they would surely kill him! Thinking wildly, he darted out of the den. He ran through the camp , shoving cats out of his way, ignoring their shouts.

"Hey!"

"Watch it!"

Deserve ran, his little heart pounding. He darted into the forest, scambling through branches and twigs. When he reached the top of a pine tree covered slope, he stopped and panted. He suddenly heard a loud cry of terror. It was Sunflower, she knew!

Deserve continued running. He couldn't stop, or they would kill him! As he ran out of the forest, he looked up in joy. It was the

road! Across it was the barn, his true home. He was about to run across it, but he froze. He couldn't go home! If Velvet found out what he did, she would hate him! She wouldn't take him back in.

He sighed and the heartbroken kit ran off as far as he could until he reached an abandoned forest. No clanners, no cats. He lay behind a tree, whimpering. This was it. He had lost everything, Dice, Velvet, Boost, Song, his home. And it was all the clanners fault. "Ill make them pay." He vowed. "I will make them pay."

[image]

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A gray tabby cat pad through the forest. It was dark, a full moon hung in the sky. The tom was hunting. He was a Thunderclan cat. Suddenly the sound of twigs snapping made the tom look around. "Hello?" He asked. No reply. The tom shrugged and continued hunting. Suddenly a black blur leaped at him, pinning him onto his side. The tom looked up in terror. It was too dark to get a good look at his attacker. On his side were two strong white paws pinning him. He looked up to see emerald eyes gleaming at him. His attacker slid out his claws and lifted his paw to strike a blow at his throat. The tom quivered in fear. "Who- Who are you?" He whimpered. His attacker purred. "Im Deserve." He then struck his blow, and a yowl of pain echoed through the night.

Deserve's Beginning Sequel: Dark Rogue

(I never completed this one, but this was it so far)

Chapter 1

The sun blazed in the sky, heat beaming down on the forest. Birds sang and fluttered around. Everything seemed good and peaceful. But it wasn't. Deserve pushed his way through the leaves. But he had changed now. He was bigger, now 3 years old. He had tints of crimson on his claws, from only one thing. Killing. Ever since the day he ran through the forest in terror, he had vowed he would make the clan cats pay. If the clans didn't live across the road, Dice would have waited for the car to pass, easily catching the turkey,

which meant Velvet wouldn't abandoned him, and Deserve never would have killed Snakekit. Deserve glanced around the forest, Shadowclan scent lingering.

"Now where's my next piece of prey?" Deserve chuckled, crouching in a bush. Just then two Shadowclan cats came from around a bush. Deserve crouched further into the bush. A brown tabby tom was the first to speak.

"Emberstar said to mark the border, so stop messing around, Graywhisker." The tabby snapped to the other cat, who was sniffing wildly.

Graywhisker snorted. "Yeah, well I want to be sure our territory is safe, Hawkfur. You remember what happened last season? Snakekit was killed."

Deserve suddenly felt uneasy. But he shook it away. I'm not a kit no more! He growled to himself. They can't kill me, I'll kill them.

Graywhisker went on. "Plus after that more mysterious murders happened. Icewing, Stonepaw, Berrytail... And according to Sunflower it was that stinking rogue kit, Deserve."

Deserve bristled, holding back a growl.

Hawkfur rolled his eyes. "You really think that piece of dung did all that? He only killed Snakekit. Besides, Deserve probably is long gone."

Deserve decided to start. He chuckled, stepping out. "That's what you think, hm?"

Graywhisker let out a cry. "It's him!" He turned to run, but Hawkfur stepped on his tail.

"Senseless coward!" Hawkfur growled while Graywhisker got to his paws. He turned to Deserve. "You think we're scared of you? You just killed a puny kit, that proves nothing of you."

Deserve purred. "I can prove you wrong." He unsheathed his claws.

"How?" Growled Hawkfur.

Deserve leaped at Hawkfur and rolled him onto his back, his white paws pinning him by the throat. "This is how." He hissed in his ear. He lunged his fangs into the toms throat, blood quickly pouring into Deserve's mouth. Graywhisker was shaking in horror while Hawkfur howled in terror. When Deserve finished him off, he let Hawkfur's body drop to the ground in the puddle of his own blood. Deserve turned to Graywhisker with blood dripping from his mouth, eyes glaring.

Graywhisker coward to the ground. "P-Please! D-Don't kill me, I beg you!"

Deserve growled. "You've seen too much." He lift a blood stained paw.

"N-No! Please, Don-" Before Graywhisker had finished, Deserve struck his claws down his belly, his guts pouring out. Deserve turned and padded away from his crime.

"I won't stop until every clan cat is dead!" He growled. "They destroyed my family!"

[image]

Chapter 2

Deserve sat by a river. He dipped his paws and mouth into the water, washing off the blood, the evidence of his crime. He got up and shook himself dry. It's a bit hard to do all this killing alone. He realized. Maybe I should start one of those... Armies. He lay down near the river, thinking. Cats who had the same hunger for blood would be under his command to kill every clan cat.

"I'll do it," He silently meowed to himself. "Now to find some cats." Deserve got up and turned to leave, only to find Shadowclan scent. "What!?" He hissed. Hadn't he washed off the scent? But he realized it was coming from the nearby forest. Deserve quickly leaped in a bush and peered out. A thick furred calico tom was padding around, following Deserve's scent.

Oh no. Thought Deserve. I'll just have to kill him. If he finds me, I'm in big trouble. Deserve leaped out of the bush and unsheathed his claws.

The calico tom turned to him. "So you killed them?" He snarled. "I've just seen Graywhisker and Hawkfur's gruesome bodies."

Deserve nodded. "It was me alright. It's a shame you won't get to tell your clan." He crouched, preparing to attack when he heard a cry.

"Stripednose!" A beautiful white she-cat bounded over to the calico tom.

Deserve stared in surprise. That she-cat looked familiar. "S-Song?" He meowed.

The she-cat swung her head at Deserve. Her eyes widened, but defended herself. "Deserve." Song growled, nodding to him. "My excuse for a brother"

Deserve narrowed his eyes at her. She still hates me.

Song stood in front of Stripednose, shaking. But she tried to hide it. "Don't you dare think about killing him!"

Behind her, Stripednose protested. "I can defend myself!"

Deserve growled and prepared to leap again, but Song's cry stopped him. "Don't you kill my mate!"

[image]

Deserve froze and looked up. "Y-your mate?"

Song nodded, still shaking. "Yeah. Don't feel bad, we all know no she-cat would ever love you."

Deserve gaped at the insult. He had to kill them! They would go to ShadowClan and tell them he was the killer. But how could he kill his own sister? Deserve carefully meowed. "Song, I don't want to kill you."

Song whispered something to Stripednose, then padded towards Deserve. "I have no feelings for you, Deserve. Nothing."

Deserve opened his jaws to reply when Song growled to stop him. "I want nothing to do with you. So lets pretend this never happened. If you leave me and Stripednose alone, we won't tell Emberstar."

Deserve thought for a moment. "You'd better mean it." He growled. "Or I will kill you."

Song nodded. "I do." She turned to Stripednose, and the two began to pad away.

Deserve couldn't help asking. "Song?"

Song kept walking, but sighed and turned her head. "What?"

Deserve blinked. "H-how's Boost?"

Song eyed him, and Deserve thought he saw a hint of pain in her eyes. "He-He's fine."

Deserve watched them leave until they disappeared into the forest.

Chapter 3

Deserve sadly padded along the road. Did Song really hate him? After he had seen her again, he felt bad. He suddenly looked up to see the barn. His home. Deserve hesitated. Should I go? He decided. I'll go. He looked at the road to make sure he wouldn't have the same fate as his father, then ran across. His stomache twisted as he came to the enterence. He peered in. Hay was scattered on the floor, and some floor boards were loose.

"Hello?" He called uneasily. Velvet? Are you here? He wanted to ask. He walked through the barn. When he rounded a hay bale, he stared in shock. There was Velvet, sitting in a corner, back facing him, looking down. But Deserve thought it was hard to believe it was her. Her once silky white fur was now ruffled and missing in places. Her bones stuck out grossly.

Deserve took a deep breath. "V-Velvet?"

Velvet slowly turned to him. "W-who are you?" She croaked weakly.

Deserve's heart clouded with pain. "I-it's me. Your son. Deserve."

Velvet stared at him with her stressed blue eyes for a while when she nodded, a bit of happiness in her voice. "D-eserve?" She struggled to get up and limped over to him. Velvet looked him from top to bottom. "You're beautiful. You've grown so much..." As she stood, she suddenly almost fell over.

Deserve quickly caught her by his shoulder on time, proping her to her feet. "Velvet, what happened to you?" He whispered, letting her lean on him.

Velvet sighed. "I couldn't hunt... T-this nice tom called... Stone was hunting for me after you left. H-he left a few months ago..." She coughed weakly. "I tried to hunt. I tried so hard. I caught some... But not enough."

Deserve's heart cracked in the realization that his mother was starving. "I'll hunt for you, Velvet," He whispered, licking her ear.

But Velvet shook her head. "N-No. I won't put-"

"-That kind of pressure on me." Deserve finished, knowing what she would say. "I'm grown now."

Velvet let out what Deserve thought was a snarl. "Dice died because of it!" She rasped. "He died because of that pressure. I don't want to be responsible for you too."

"It wasn't your fault." Deserve whispered. Suddenly he heard a crackle, and the smell of smoke. Deserve spun around and gasped. Fire! Fire blazed on the roof and corner. Deserve spun back to his mother in terror. "Fire!" He gasped. "Come on Velvet, let's get out of here!" He grabbed his mothers scruff before she could protest and hauled her toward the entrance. But suddenly the back of the barn came a blaze, which lead to the roof. Beams began to collapse, falling to the barn ground. "No!" Yowled Deserve as Velvet stood beside him. Deserve spotted a way out and raced towards it, Velvet running beside him. "Stay with me!" He hissed to her. But suddenly

a beam collapsed.

Deserve heard a loud cry of pain. He spun around in horror. Velvet was trapped under it, the fire not far from her.

"Velvet!" He yowled, racing back to her. He struggled to lift the beam with his shoulders and back, but it wouldn't budge.

"D-Deserve!" Whispered Velvet while he franticly shoved himself at the beam. "It's no use. Get out of here."

Deserve stared at her in terror as he hauled at the beam. "No! I won't leave you!"

"Deserve!" Hissed Velvet. "I've lived my life. It's my time anyway. Please go!" She pleaded as the fire neared.

The flames blazed just a little ways from them now. "No!" Cried Deserve. "I'm not leaving without you!" He began to go insane, franticly throwing himself at the beam.

"Deserve!" Spat Velvet, with the strength she had, striking his head with her paw. Deserve finally snapped out of it and stopped, staring at her painfully. "Go." She whispered.

Deserve whimpered and pressed his head into her neck. "I love you."

Velvet nodded. "I love you too. Now leave, go. Go have a great life, my son."

Deserve gave her a last pleading glance before racing out of the barn. When he reached as far as the road, he looked back painfully as the last of the barn burned to pieces.

[image]